

*I have failed...*

*The Maximal terrorists have won.*

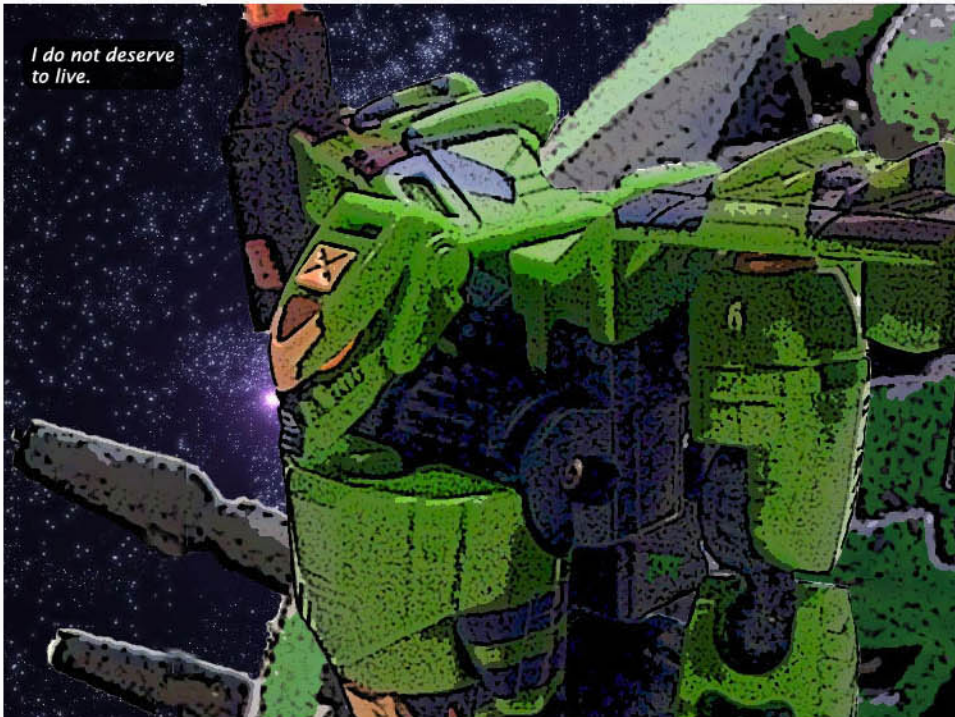
*Cybertron is... infested. I saw the change from here in orbit. A blinding light covered the surface of the planet, and when it was gone the blight was visible.*

*It covers roads, cities, towers... everything.*

*I could have stopped this.*



*I do not deserve to live.*



#### LAST TIME ON BEAST MACHINES:

The planet Cybertron has been changed. Reformatted from a metal world into one where the organic and technological mix into something new: technorganic. The transformers themselves have also been converted into new technorganic forms. All except two.

Obsidian and Strika, famously successful generals from Cybertron's past, have escaped the change. In the final days of the occupation of Cybertron by the insane tyrant Megatron, they served him in his effort to rid the planet of all organic life. Tricked by Cheetor, Maximal second-in-command, they were thrown out of the atmosphere and into orbit by the anti-gravity boosters of Megatron's fortress.

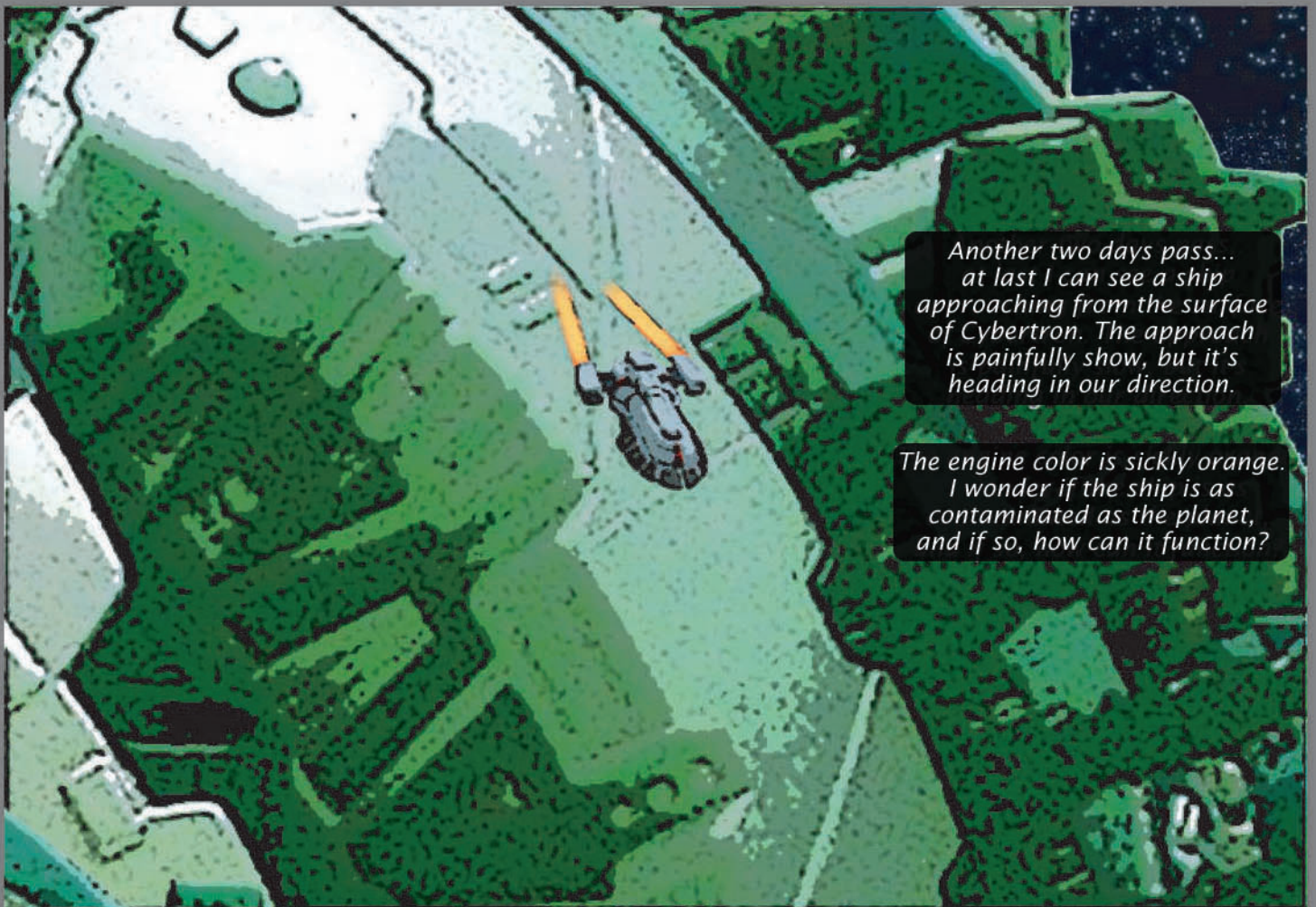
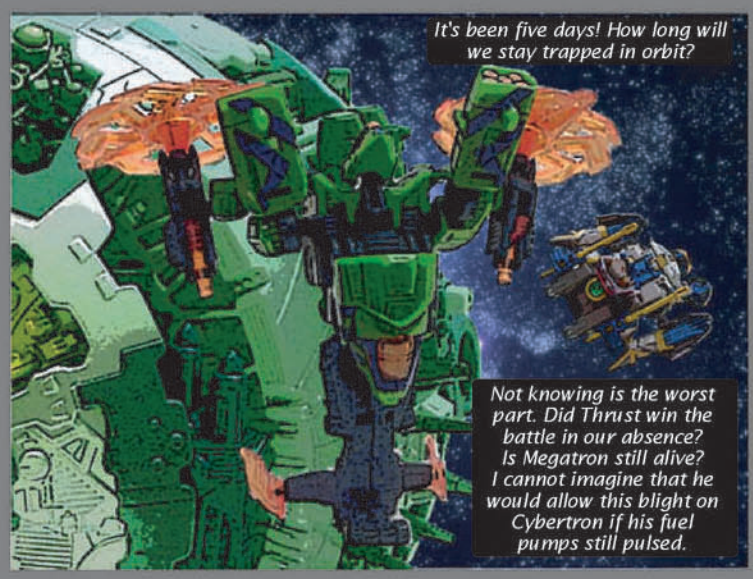
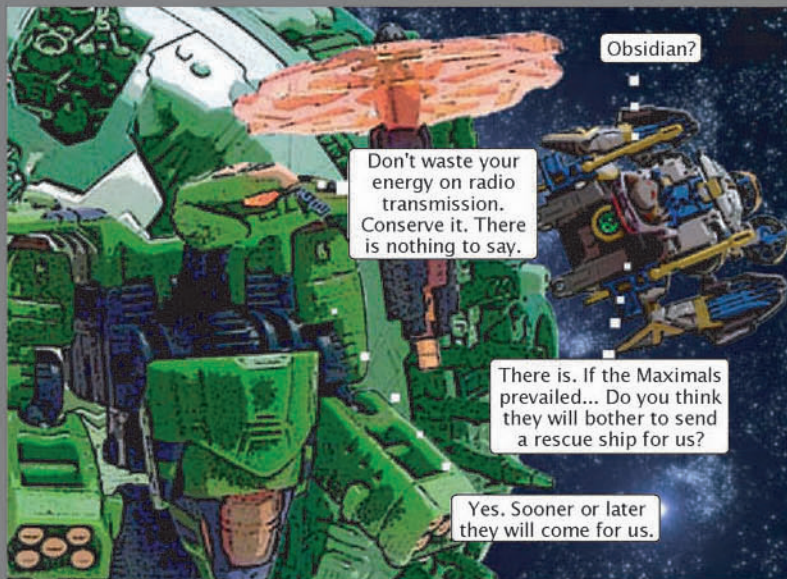
Now they float in space, trapped and helpless. Awaiting rescue, and a return to the planet they once defended. A planet that they no longer recognize.



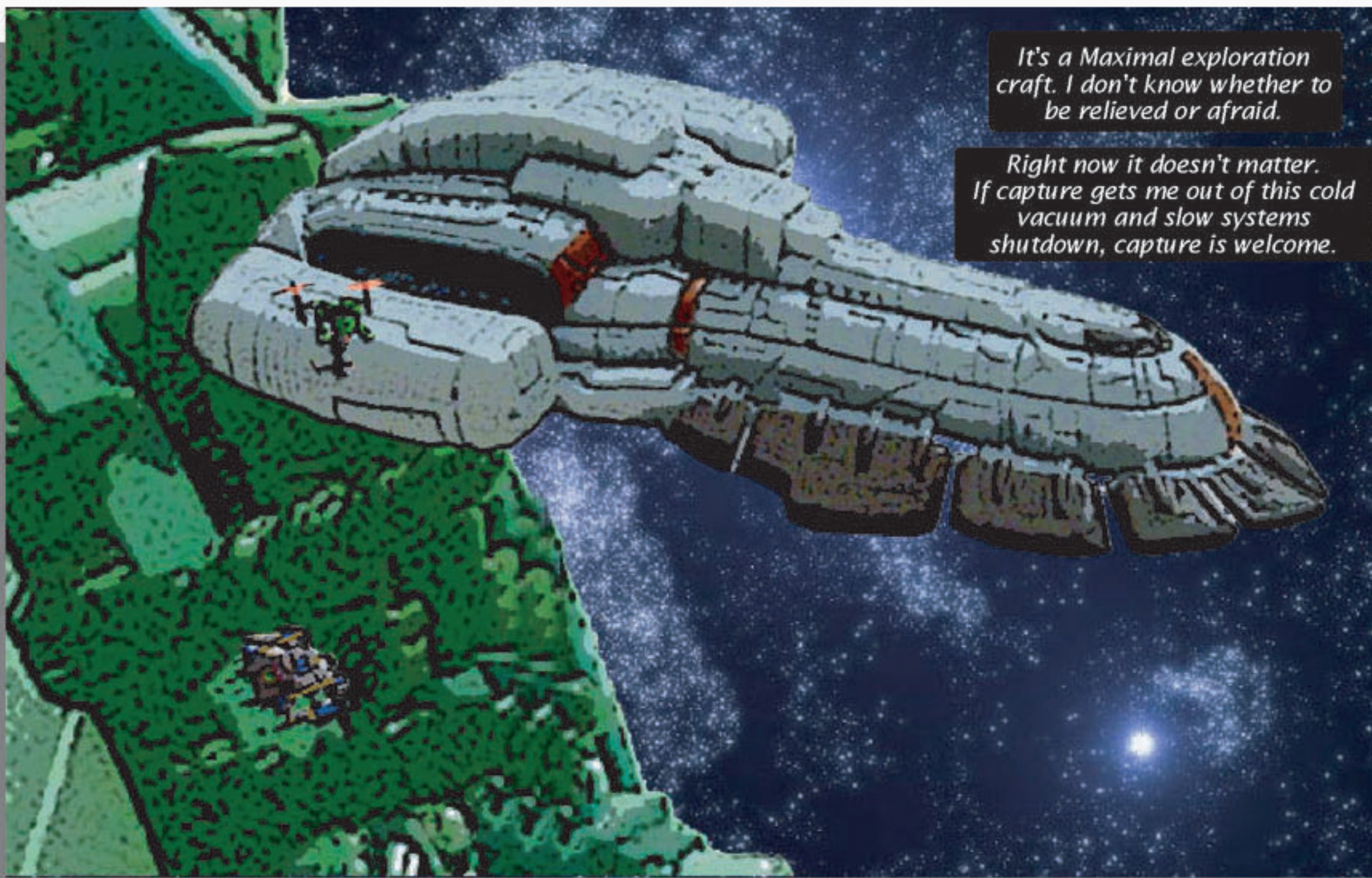
# OBSIDIAN'S LAMENT

STORY AND ART: Shane Anderson





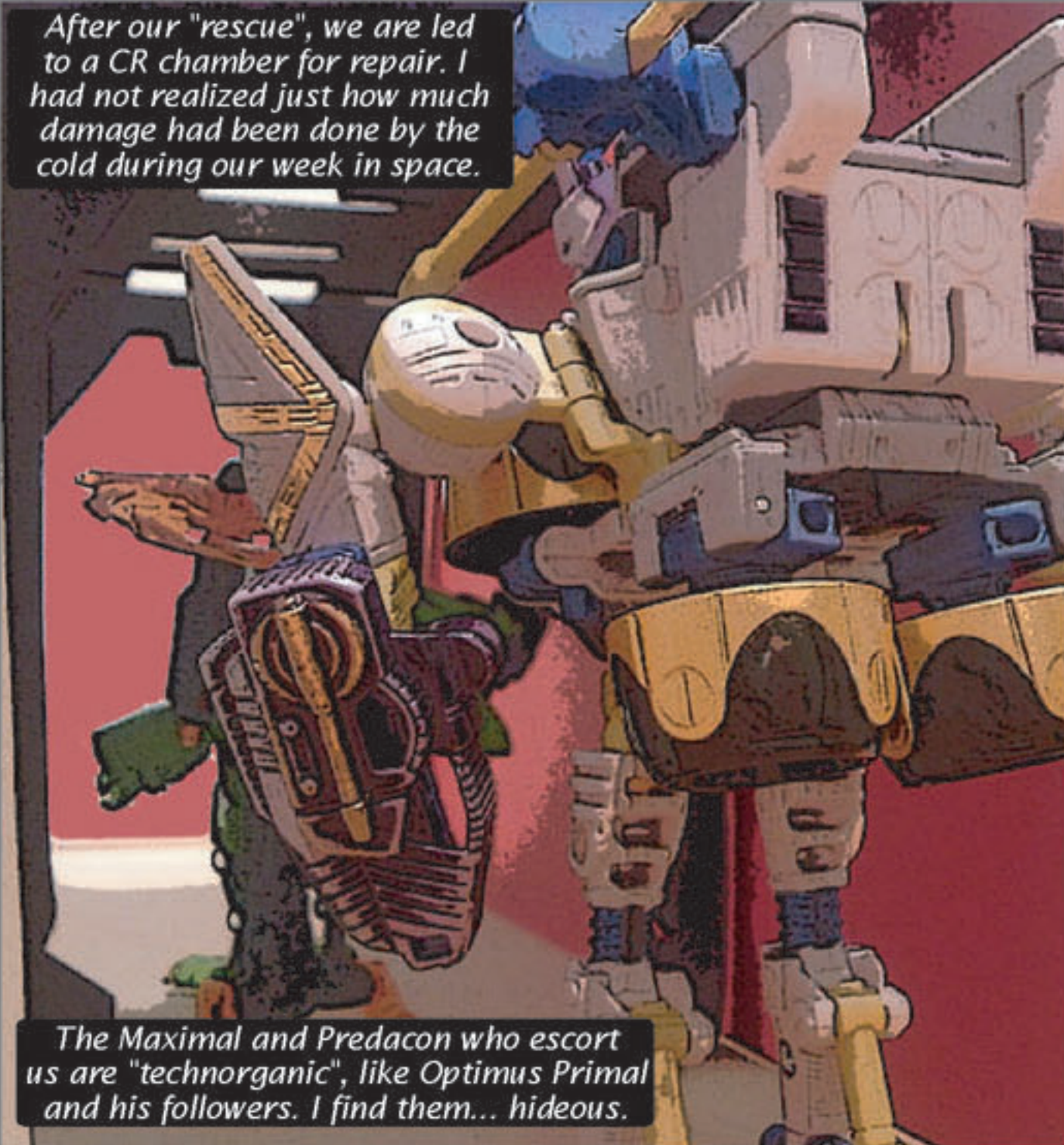




It's a Maximal exploration craft. I don't know whether to be relieved or afraid.

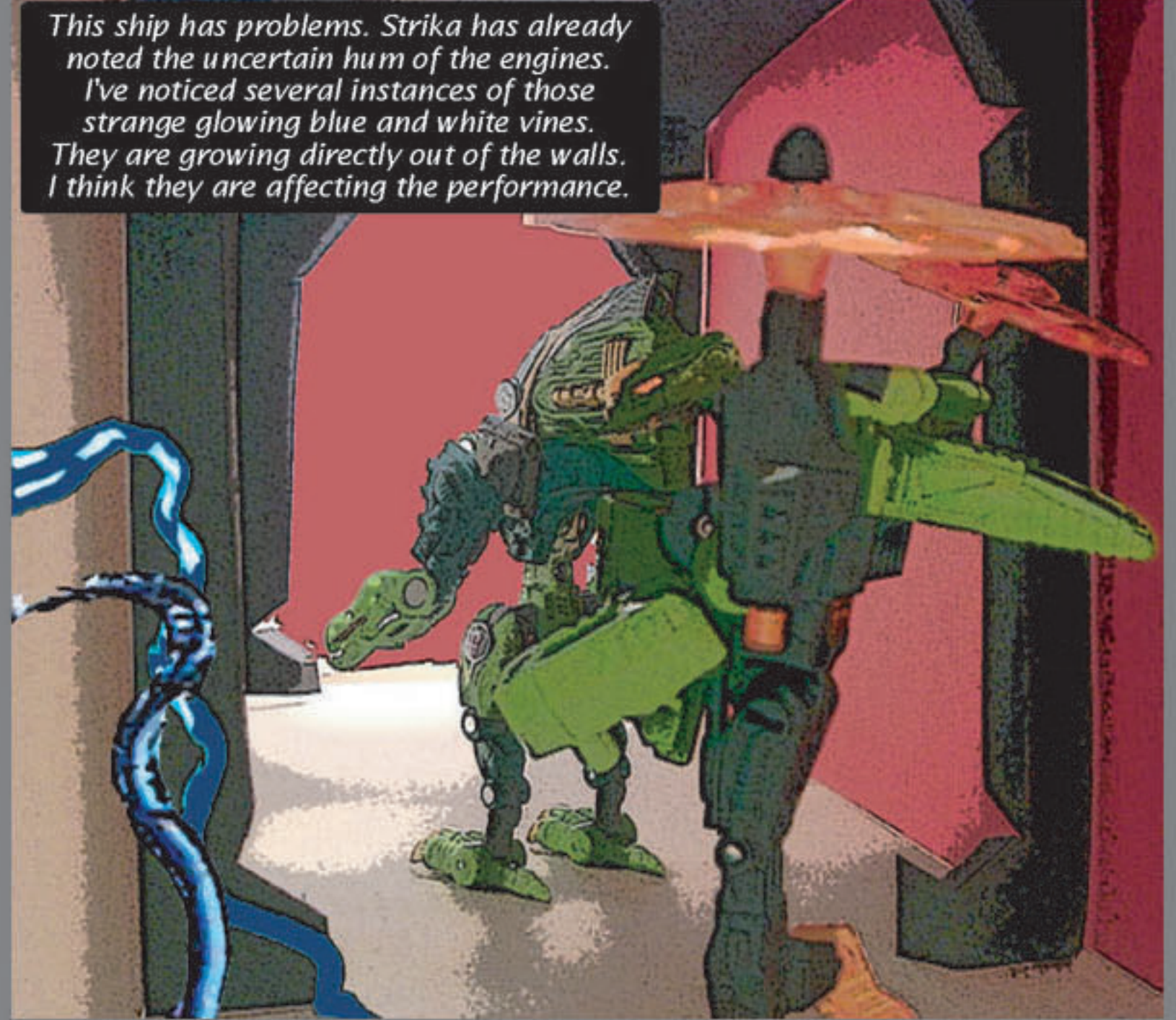
Right now it doesn't matter. If capture gets me out of this cold vacuum and slow systems shutdown, capture is welcome.

After our "rescue", we are led to a CR chamber for repair. I had not realized just how much damage had been done by the cold during our week in space.

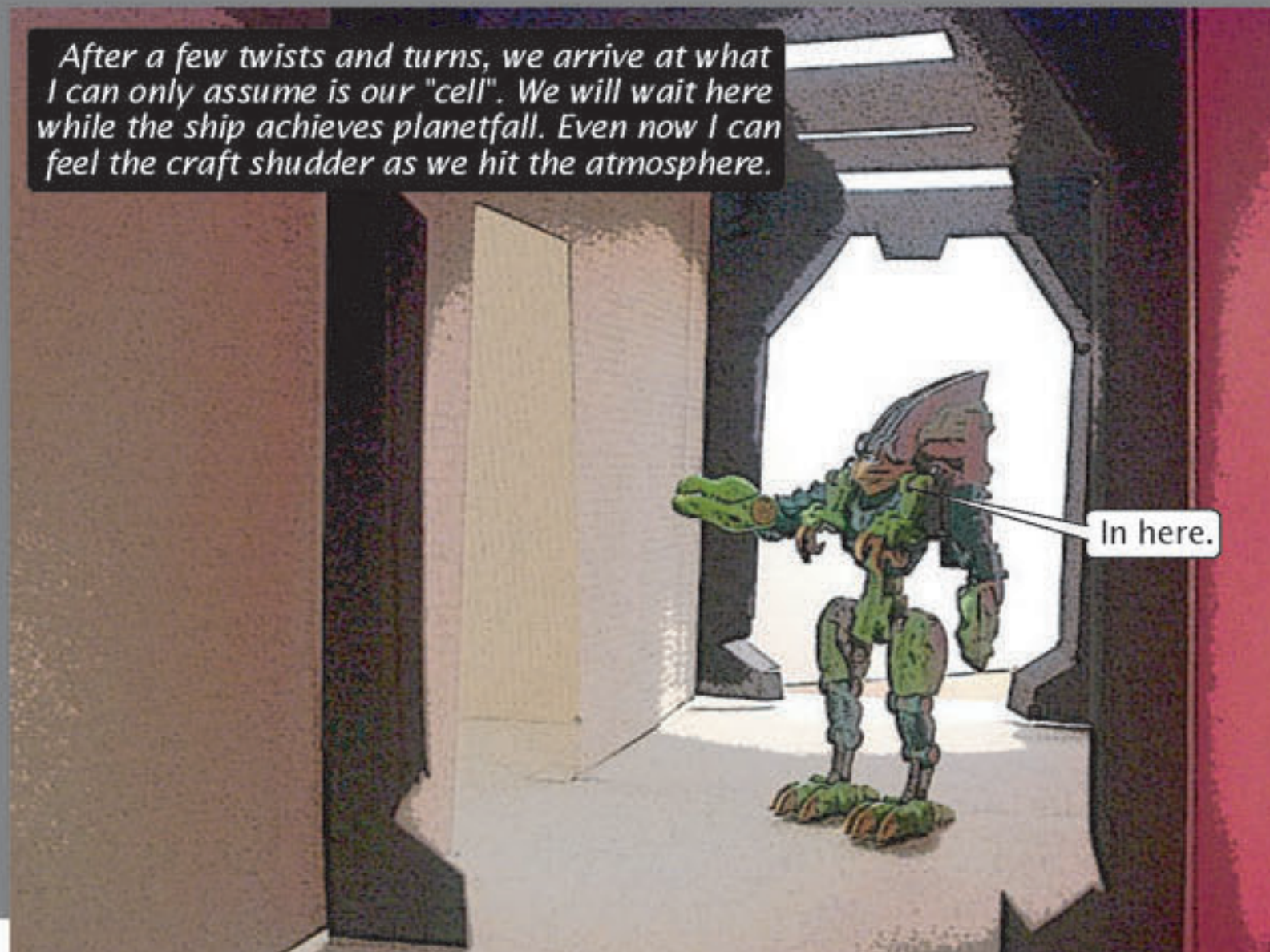


The Maximal and Predacon who escort us are "technorganic", like Optimus Primal and his followers. I find them... hideous.

This ship has problems. Strika has already noted the uncertain hum of the engines. I've noticed several instances of those strange glowing blue and white vines. They are growing directly out of the walls. I think they are affecting the performance.

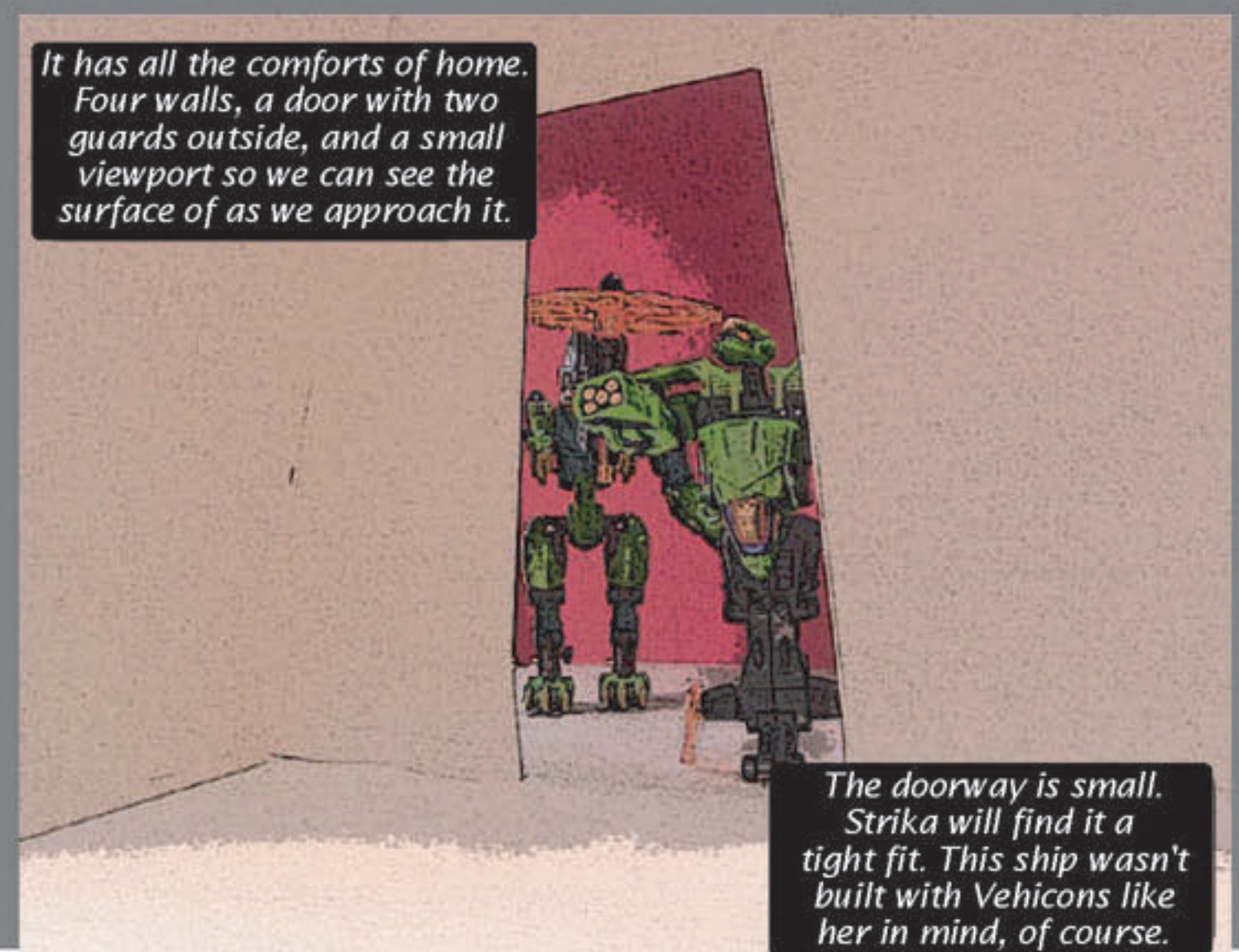


After a few twists and turns, we arrive at what I can only assume is our "cell". We will wait here while the ship achieves planetfall. Even now I can feel the craft shudder as we hit the atmosphere.



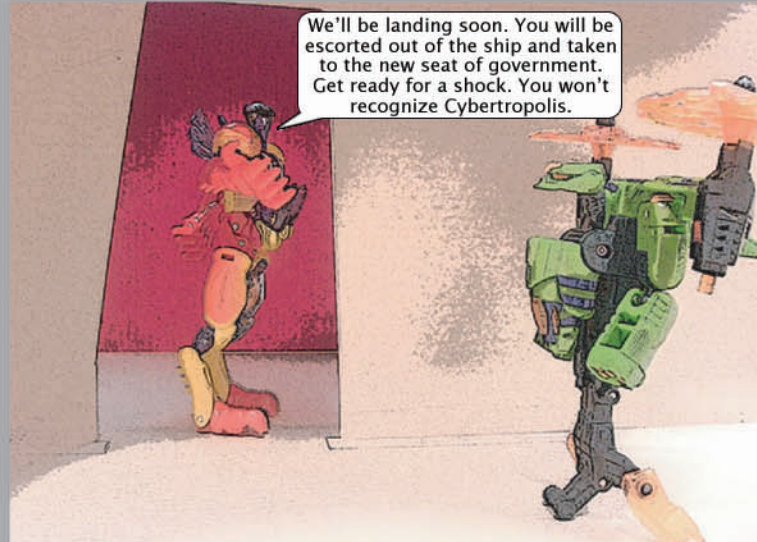
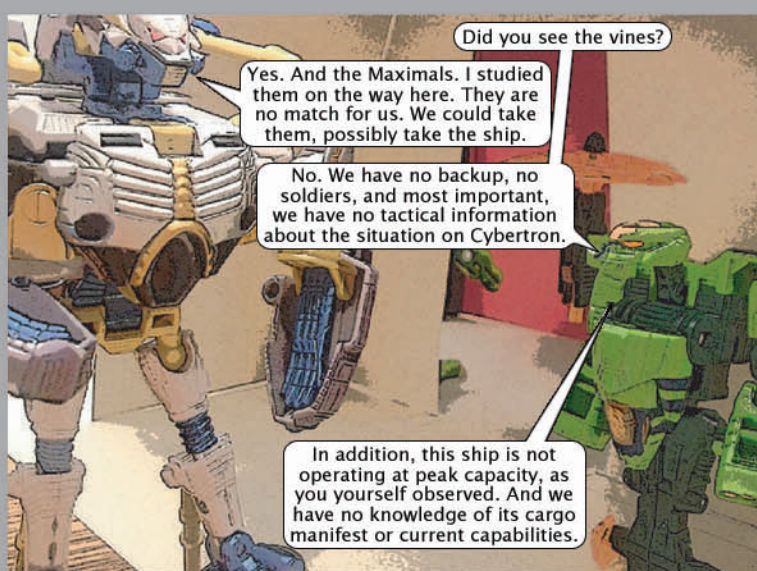
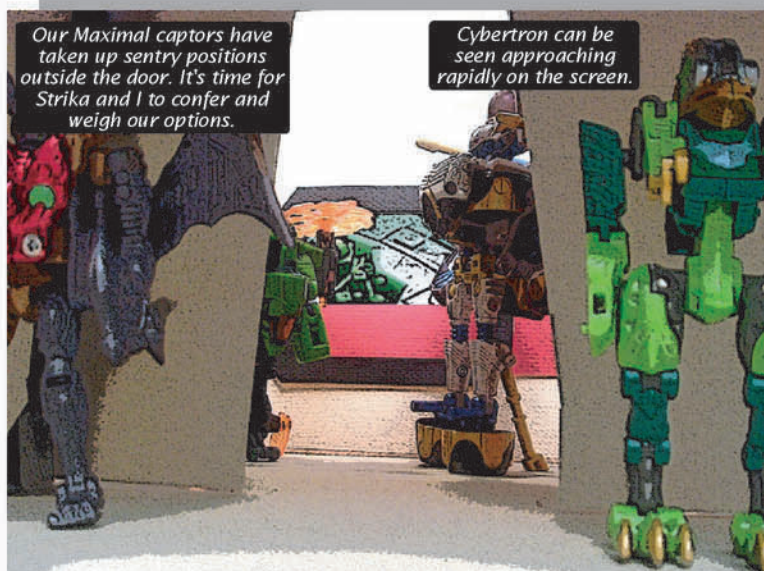
In here.

It has all the comforts of home. Four walls, a door with two guards outside, and a small viewport so we can see the surface of as we approach it.

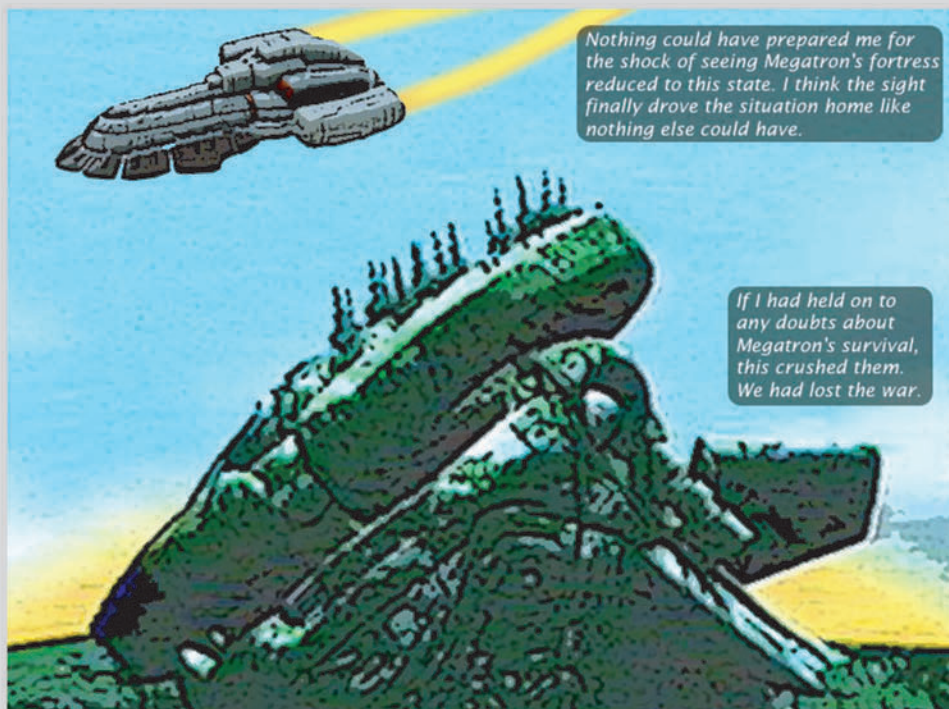
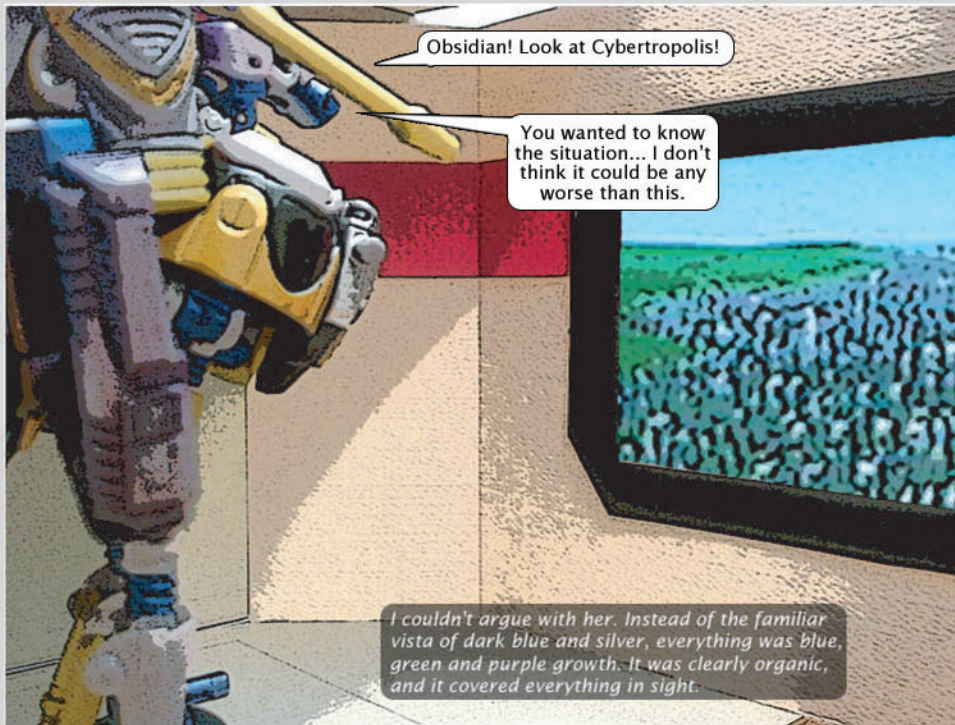


The doorway is small. Strika will find it a tight fit. This ship wasn't built with Vehicons like her in mind, of course.



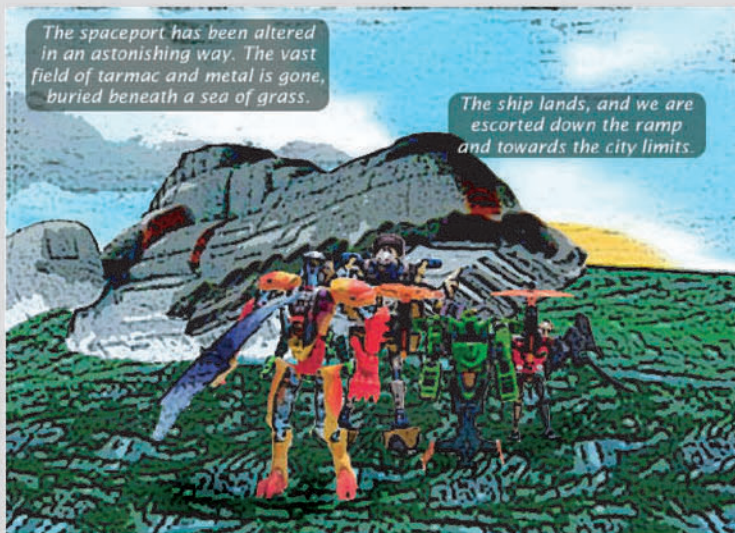








# ADJUDICATION



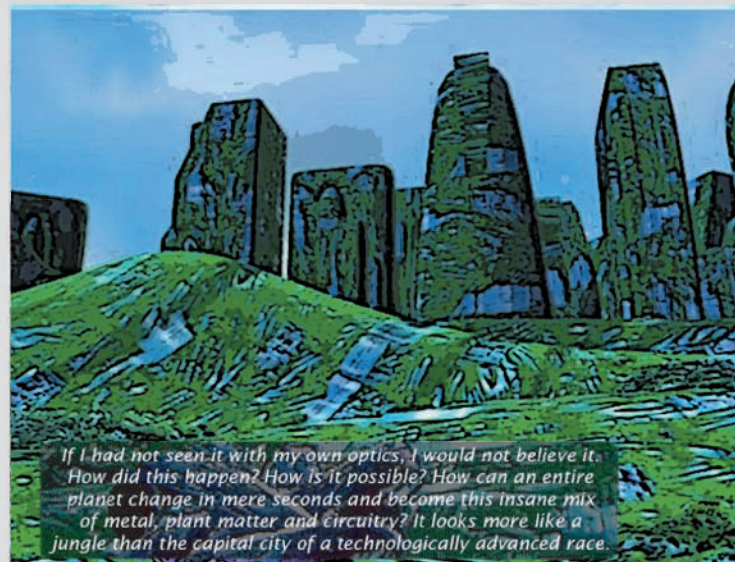
The spaceport has been altered in an astonishing way. The vast field of tarmac and metal is gone, buried beneath a sea of grass.

The ship lands, and we are escorted down the ramp and towards the city limits.



I think the ship we returned in is one of the few still functioning.

Then I see the city itself, and the spacecraft no longer interest me.



If I had not seen it with my own optics, I would not believe it. How did this happen? How is it possible? How can an entire planet change in mere seconds and become this insane mix of metal, plant matter and circuitry? It looks more like a jungle than the capital city of a technologically advanced race.



Amazed, Obsidian? I warned you that you wouldn't recognize it. Nor will you recognize the people you helped to enslave.

Come this way. We'll see who is in charge and passing judgment today.



Come back!

I must see what they've done to the city... I do not care whether the Maximals shoot me or not.



Everywhere... every tower, every street, every canal...

Obsidian!





I would you to surrender now and make to attempt to get away! You have nowhere to run!



When Silverbolt talks, it always sounds as if he's making a pronouncement or a speech. Pompous fool. I don't care.

I wanted to see what had happened to Cybertronopolis. I am well aware that there is nowhere to run. Lead on.



After a few minutes walking, I begin to recognize the area, despite the growth on everything. Sure enough, we arrive in a square near one of Cybertronopolis' many monuments. This one is supposed to be where the first spot where the city was founded, years ago.

The square is empty, except for a solitary figure. I recognize him at once. Primal's second in command, Cheetor.

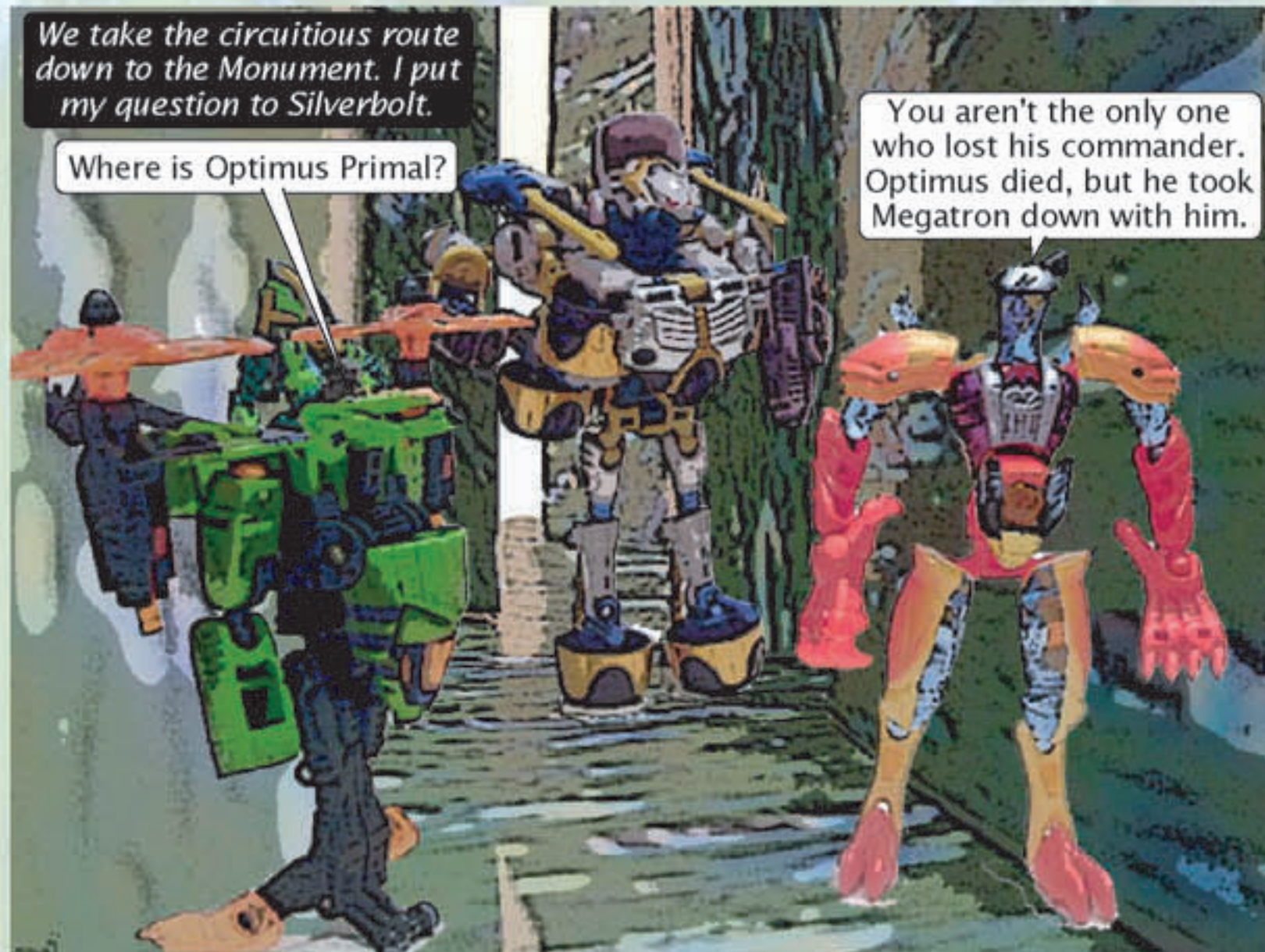
Silverbolt!



Where is Optimus Primal? Silverbolt said that Megatron was dead. Could Primal be dead as well? I hope that isn't the case. If our fate lies in Cheetor's hands...

Down here! And you've brought them! Good.





We take the circuitous route down to the Monument. I put my question to Silverbolt.

Where is Optimus Primal?

You aren't the only one who lost his commander. Optimus died, but he took Megatron down with him.

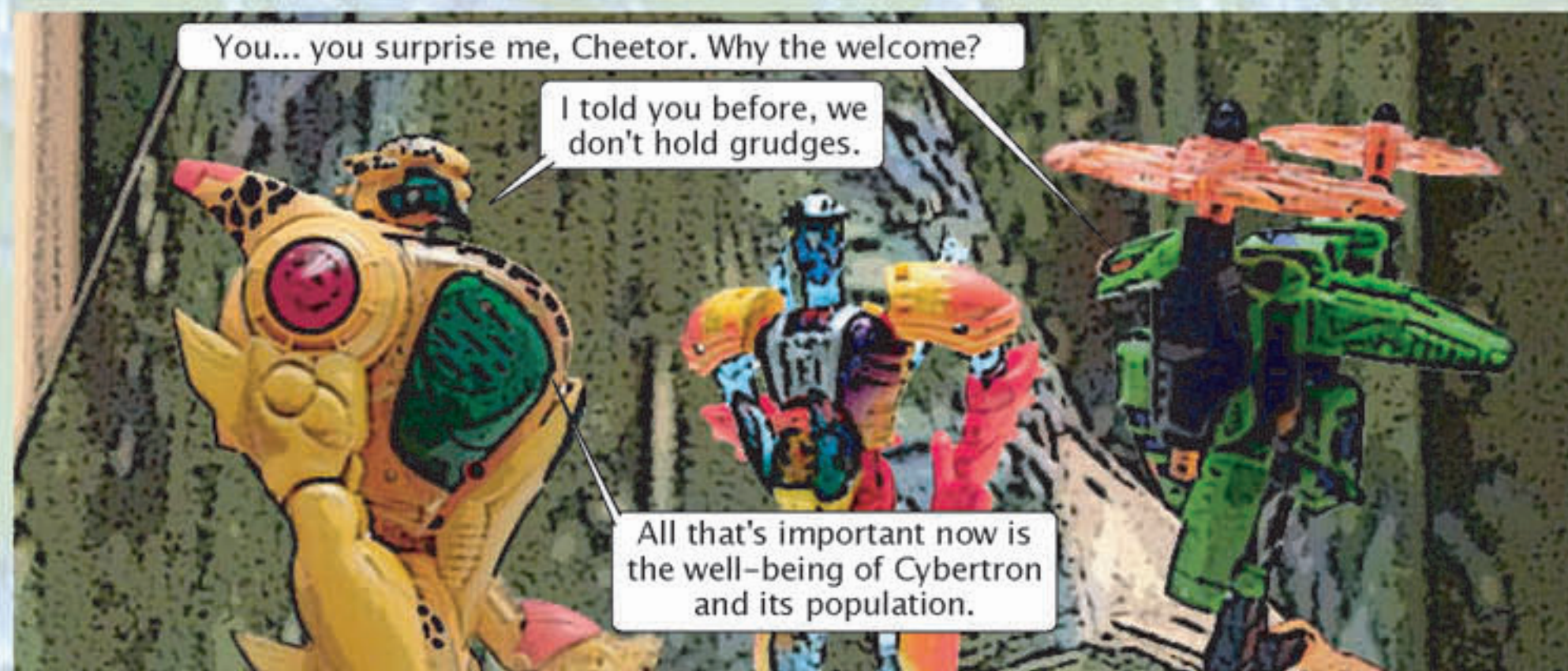


Cheetor steps forward to meet us, his hand raised... in greeting?

Strika.. Obsidian. Welcome back to terra firma. Things have changed, as you can see. But one thing has not. This is still Cybertron, our home.

Welcome back home.

This is not what I expected...



You... you surprise me, Cheetor. Why the welcome?

I told you before, we don't hold grudges.

All that's important now is the well-being of Cybertron and its population.



So we are *not* to be treated as war criminals then?



That's for the council of Elders to decide, not us.



Maybe, once they fully resume governmental responsibilities.

The public isn't too accepting of them since Megatron took over the planet under their watch.

Without me, they wouldn't have...



They are the legitimate government!

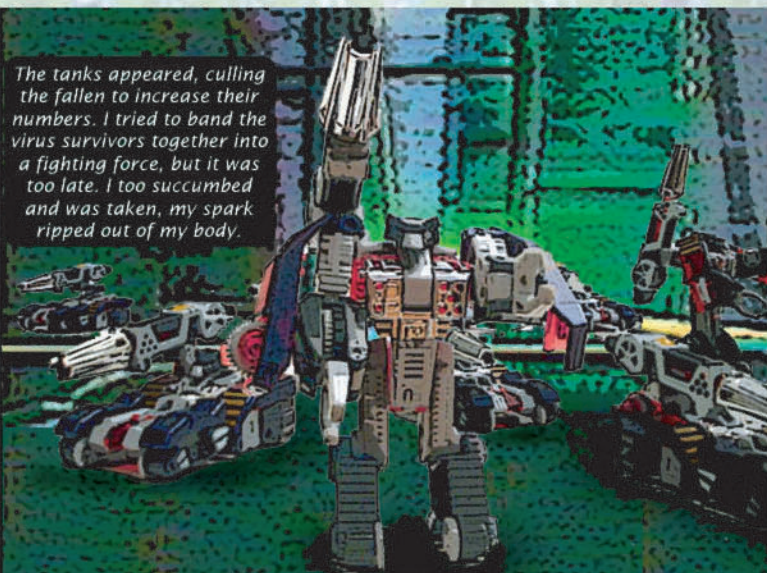
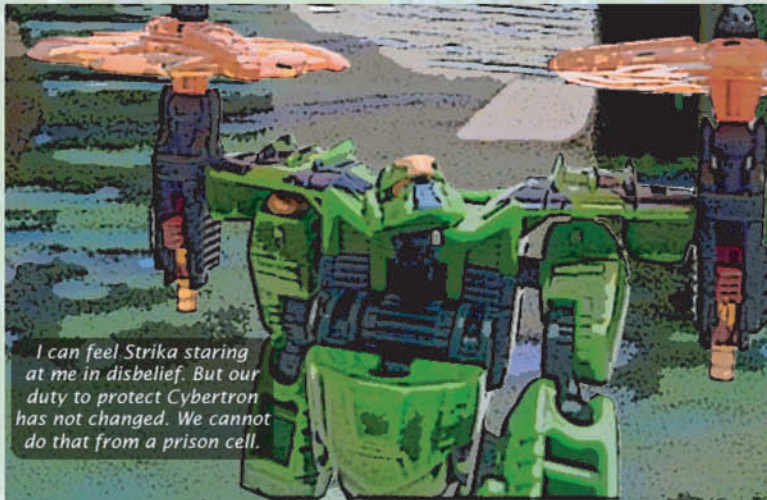
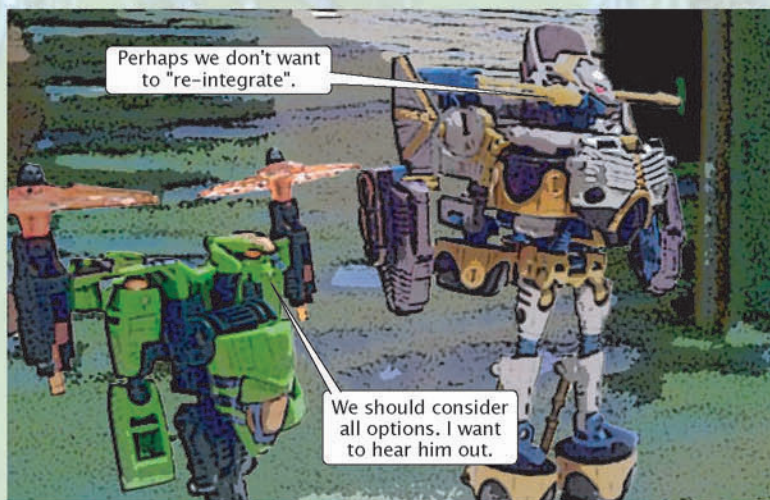


Silverbolt, the Oracle chose me.



Obsidian, Strika, I feel that your re-integration into our society will do far more to heal old wounds than locking you away. You both have much to offer Cybertron.







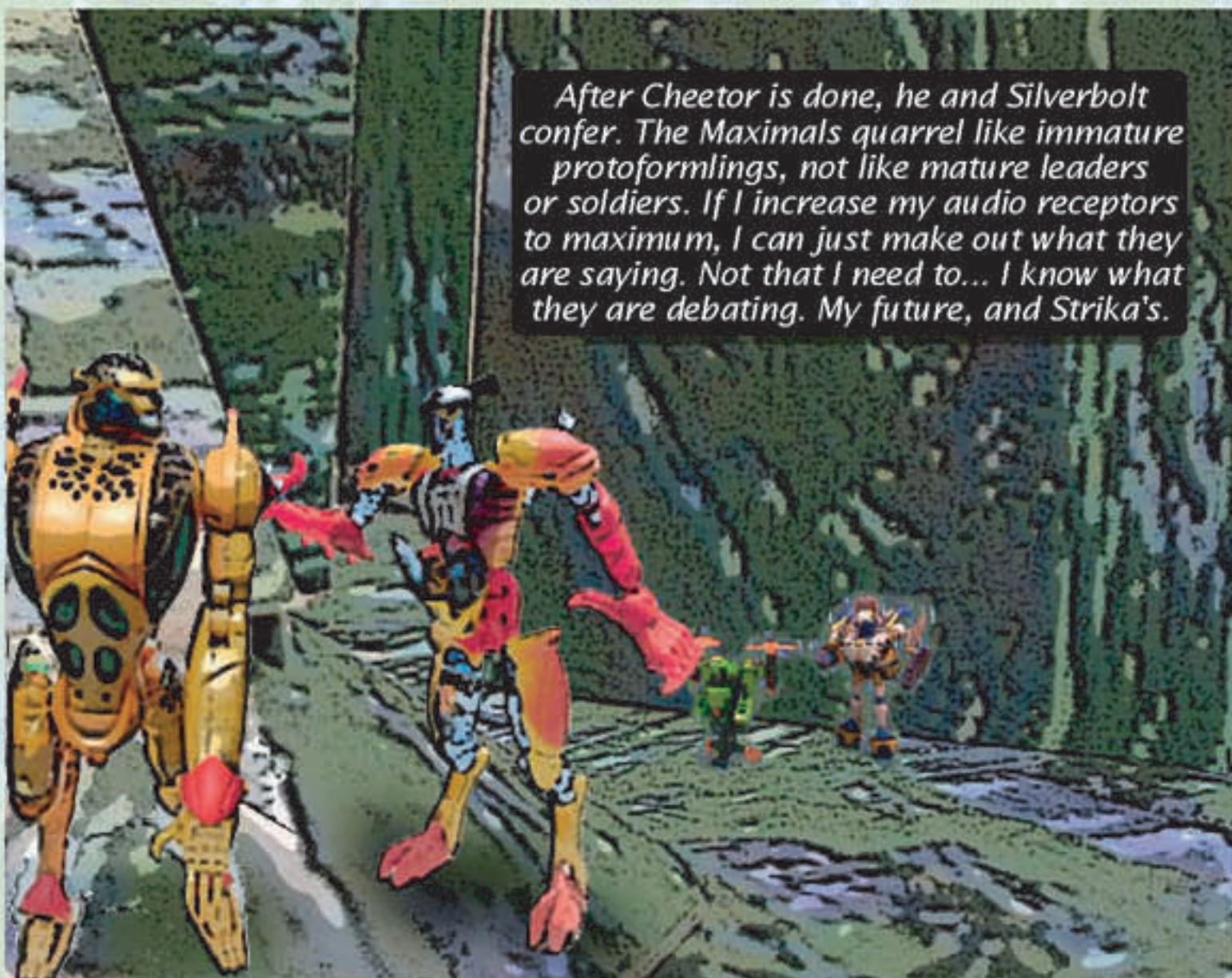
After what seemed like an eternity, there was a voice in the darkness.  
"I have need of your unique talent as a general!  
Cybertron is in danger! You must rise again to protect it!"



It was Megatron. What choice did I have but to either serve him or remain imprisoned?  
My imperative was to protect Cybertron, and Megatron WAS Cybertron.

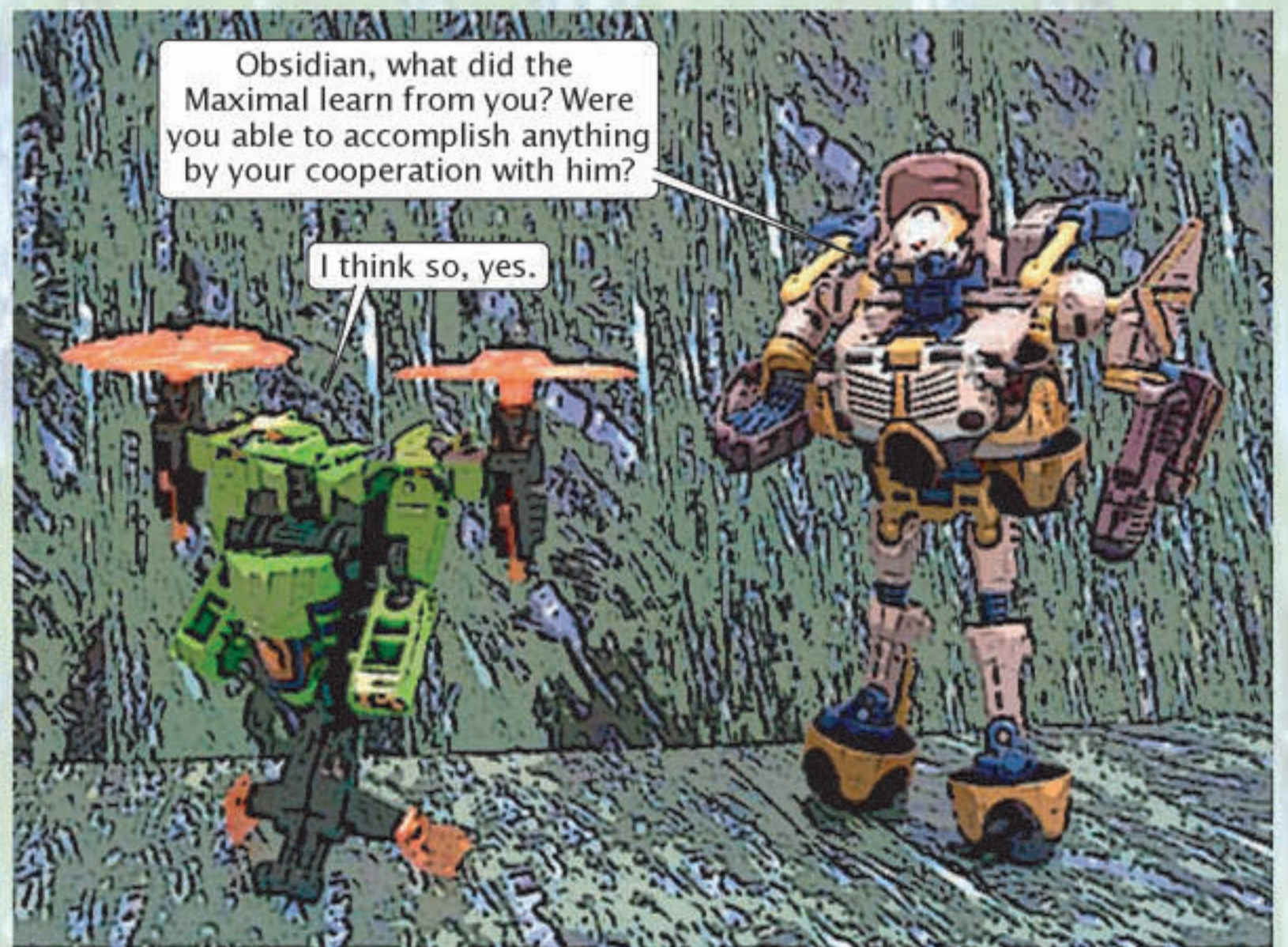
My choice, such as it was, was made. I went to war for Megatron.

After Cheetor is done, he and Silverbolt confer. The Maximals quarrel like immature protoformlings, not like mature leaders or soldiers. If I increase my audio receptors to maximum, I can just make out what they are saying. Not that I need to... I know what they are debating. My future, and Strika's.

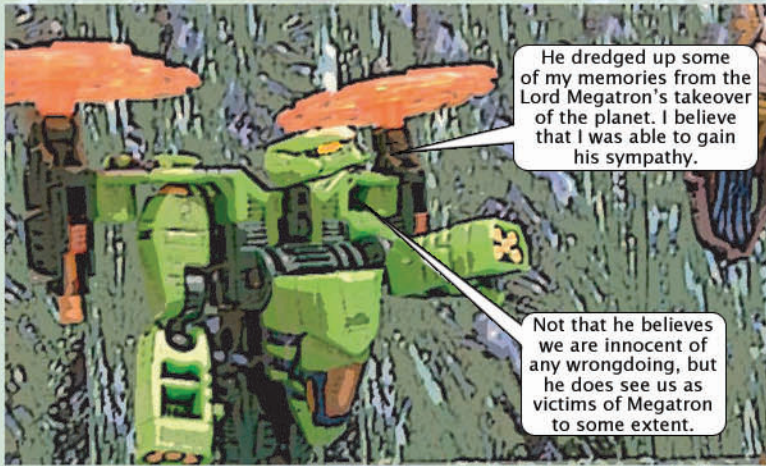


Obsidian, what did the Maximal learn from you? Were you able to accomplish anything by your cooperation with him?

I think so, yes.

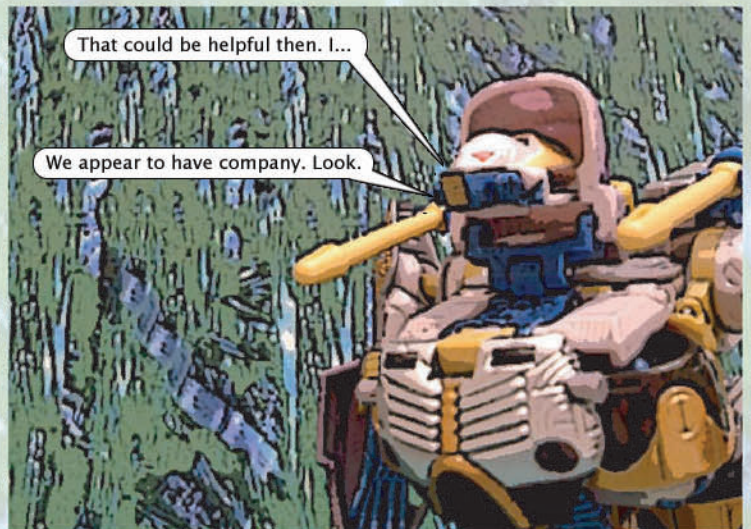






He dredged up some of my memories from the Lord Megatron's takeover of the planet. I believe that I was able to gain his sympathy.

Not that he believes we are innocent of any wrongdoing, but he does see us as victims of Megatron to some extent.



That could be helpful then. I...

We appear to have company. Look.



A technorganic Transformer. One of the new inhabitants of Cybertron. I scan for Maximal energy signatures

He's not a Maximal. He's a Predacon.

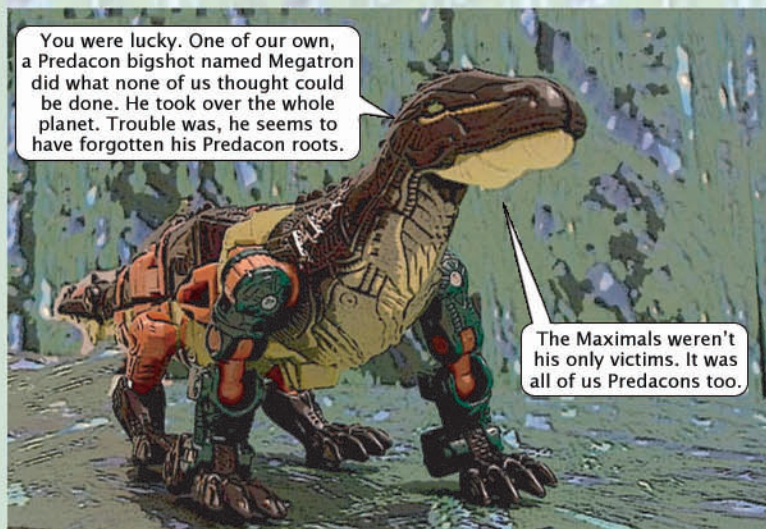
You! Who are you? You haven't... you're not like us. How?



What do I tell this creature? That I served Megatron and kept him enslaved? Does he know about our part in the war?

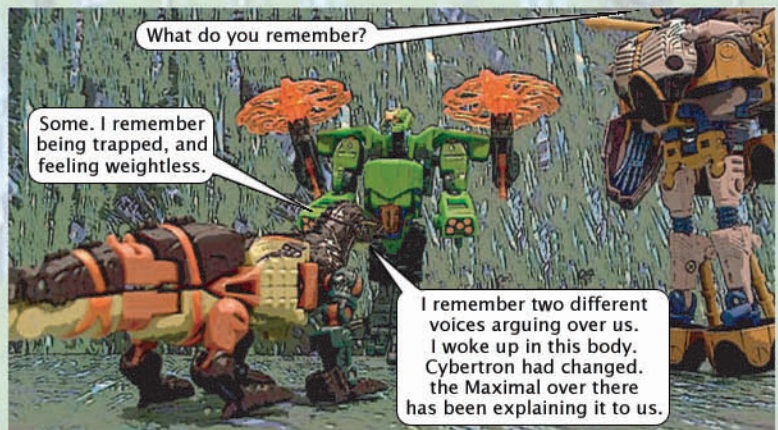
We were not on the surface when the change occurred. We saw it from orbit.

So you're part of an exploration mission? Just returning home?



You were lucky. One of our own, a Predacon bigshot named Megatron did what none of us thought could be done. He took over the whole planet. Trouble was, he seems to have forgotten his Predacon roots.

The Maximals weren't his only victims. It was all of us Predacons too.

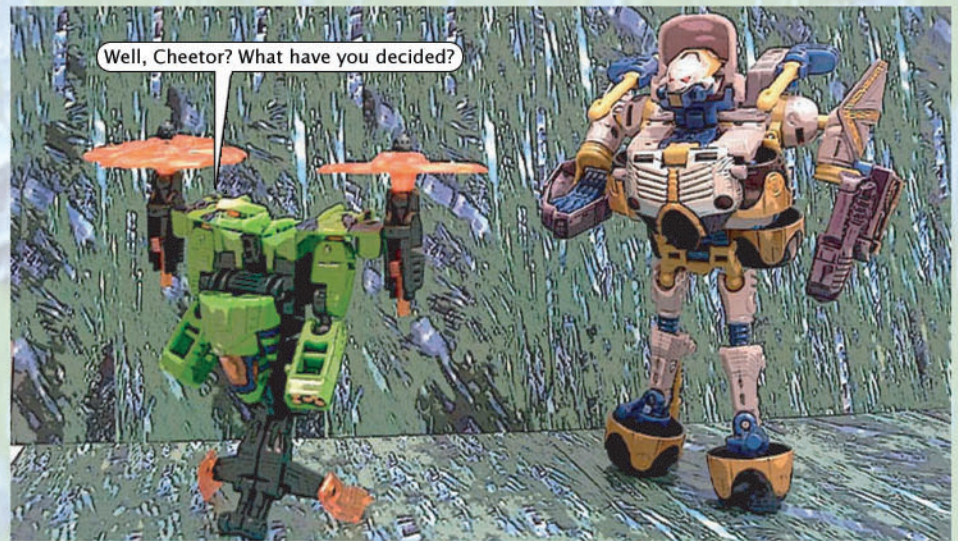
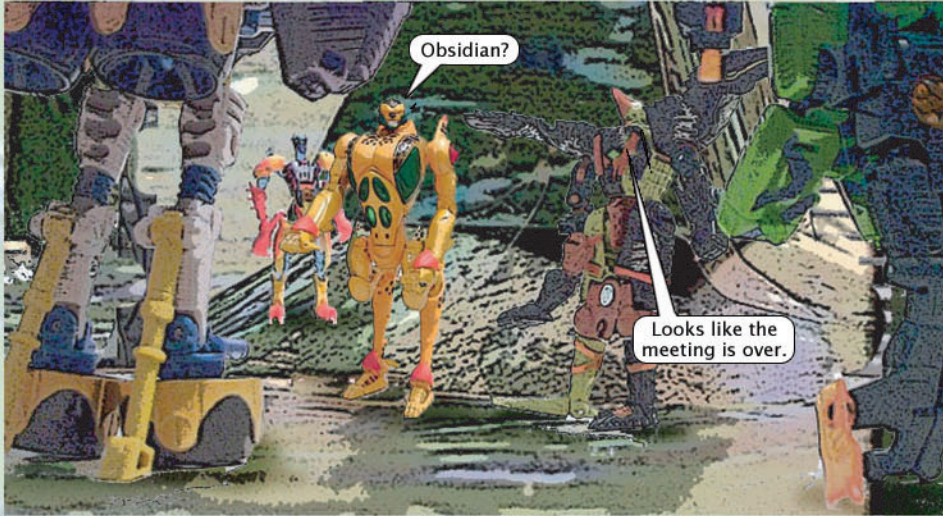


What do you remember?

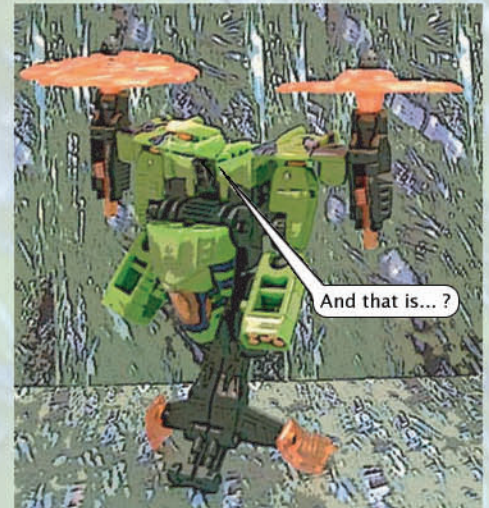
Some. I remember being trapped, and feeling weightless.

I remember two different voices arguing over us. I woke up in this body. Cybertron had changed. The Maximal over there has been explaining it to us.

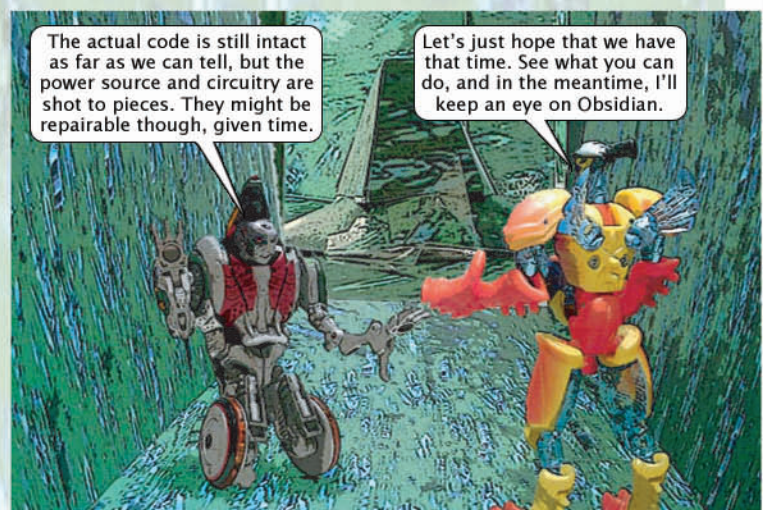
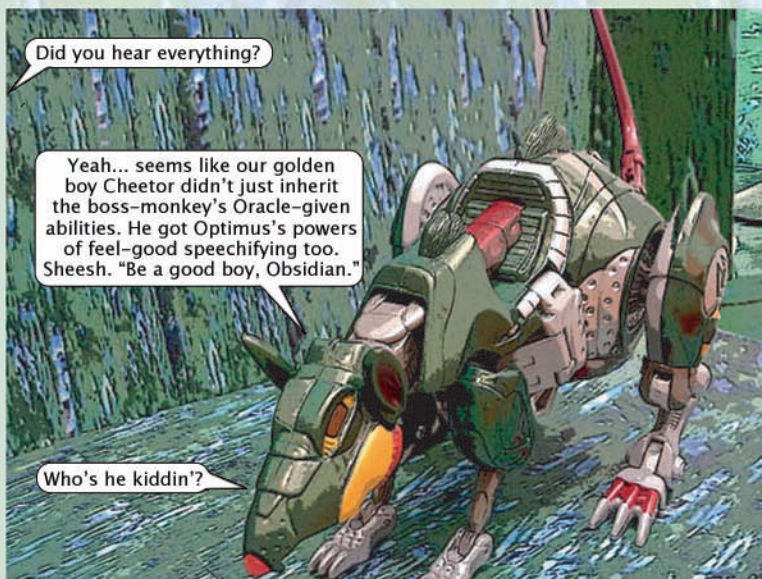








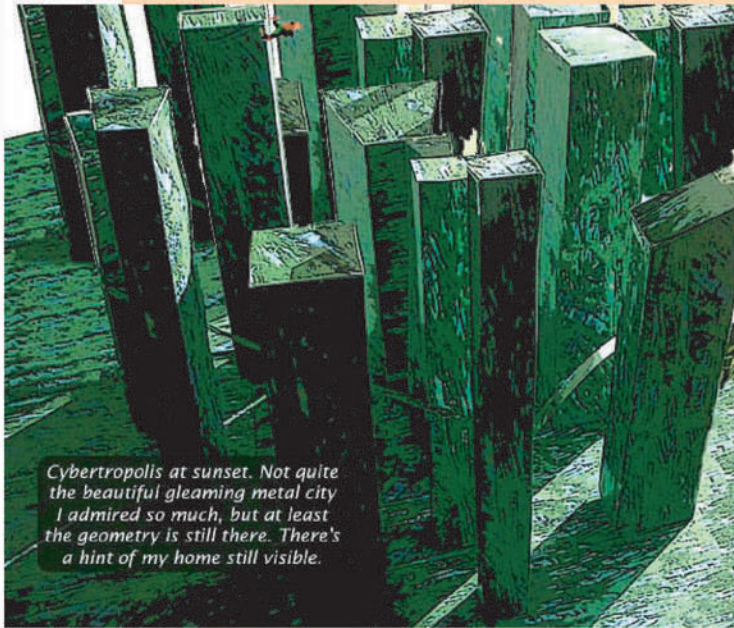




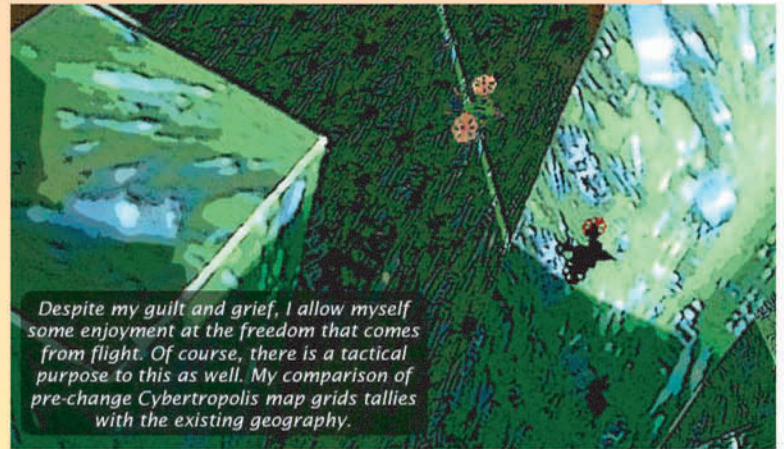




# THE NEW BREED



Cybertropolis at sunset. Not quite the beautiful gleaming metal city I admired so much, but at least the geometry is still there. There's a hint of my home still visible.

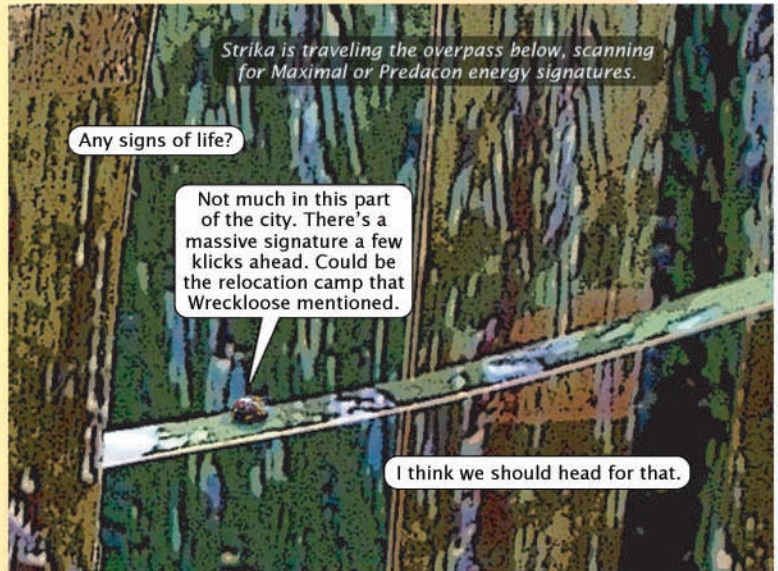


Despite my guilt and grief, I allow myself some enjoyment at the freedom that comes from flight. Of course, there is a tactical purpose to this as well. My comparison of pre-change Cybertronpolis map grids tallies with the existing geography.



Sunset isn't too far away. Cheetor warned us that there was a curfew in effect. I have advised Strika that we should honor it for now at least. No point in provoking the Maximals without a good reason to do so.

Until then however, we will continue with our tactical survey of the city.



Strika is traveling the overpass below, scanning for Maximal or Predacon energy signatures.

Any signs of life?

Not much in this part of the city. There's a massive signature a few clicks ahead. Could be the relocation camp that Wreckloose mentioned.

I think we should head for that.



Agreed. We still need to learn...



Obsidian! I can see something heading your direction at high speed!



Understood.



Where... ah.



There he is. Maximal, reptile avian. Seems to be hostile.

They lied to us!

Lethal force would only jeopardize our tenuous position with the Maximals. Better not kill him then. Other options?

His attack is clumsy and easily avoided. But he's determined.

He's already turning to try again. I need a non-lethal means to disable him. It would be easier if we weren't hundreds of feet above the ground. Then again, the overpass isn't far down...

I should survive the fall...

...but will he?

Only have seconds...

Ejection charge fired, hand extended...

Got it! Now as he makes his attack pass, and before my momentum drags me down to the ground...

It worked... he's disabled, but able to limp along. I think he's spotted the overpass down below and is trying to control his descent.

I should be able to make use of my remaining attached rotor blade to control my fall as well, though it won't be a soft landing.

... slice the wing membrane, and down he goes!

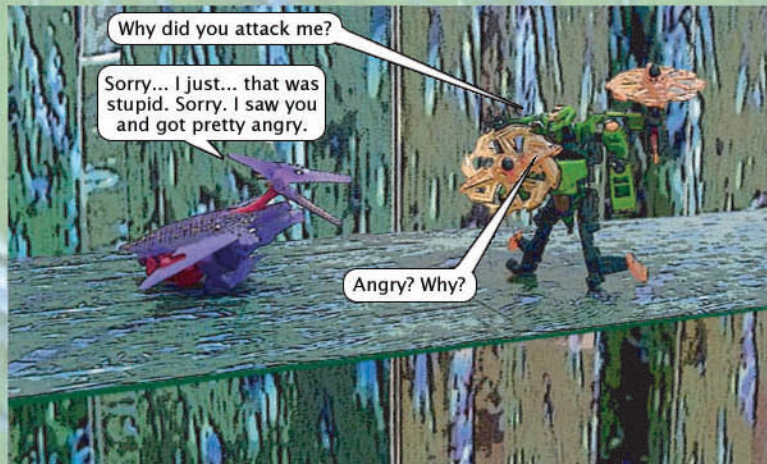




He hits it and skids... but is able to keep from going over the edge.



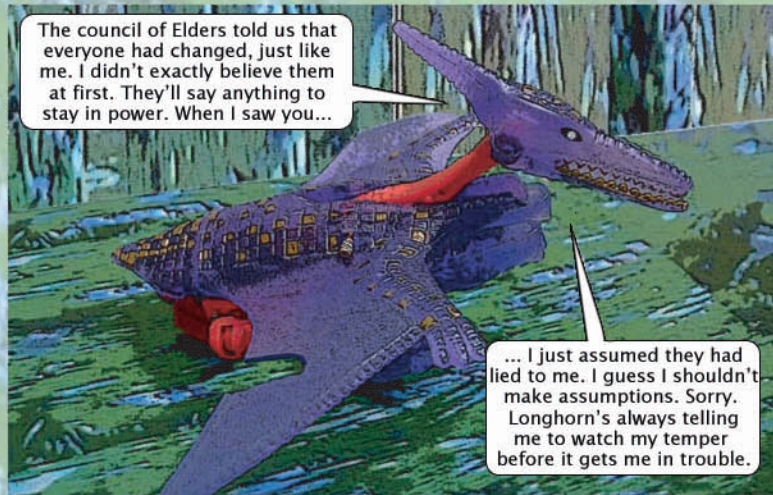
Not as bad an impact for me as I thought.



Why did you attack me?

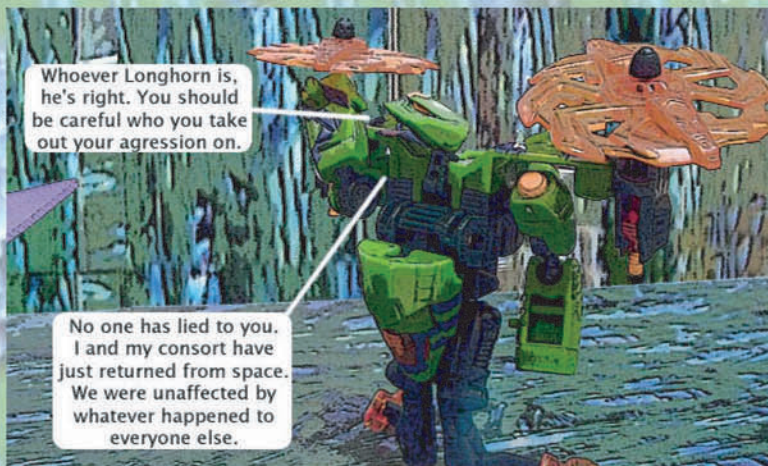
Sorry... I just... that was stupid. Sorry. I saw you and got pretty angry.

Angry? Why?



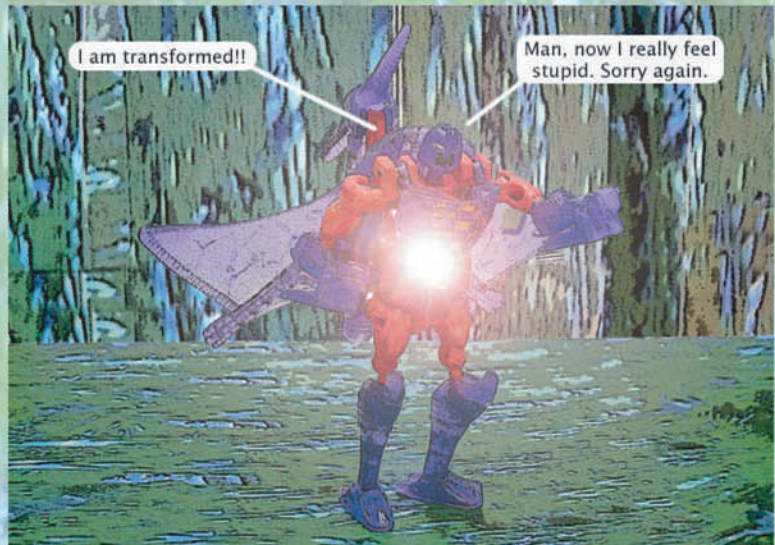
The council of Elders told us that everyone had changed, just like me. I didn't exactly believe them at first. They'll say anything to stay in power. When I saw you...

... I just assumed they had lied to me. I guess I shouldn't make assumptions. Sorry. Longhorn's always telling me to watch my temper before it gets me in trouble.



Whoever Longhorn is, he's right. You should be careful who you take out your aggression on.

No one has lied to you. I and my consort have just returned from space. We were unaffected by whatever happened to everyone else.



I am transformed!!

Man, now I really feel stupid. Sorry again.

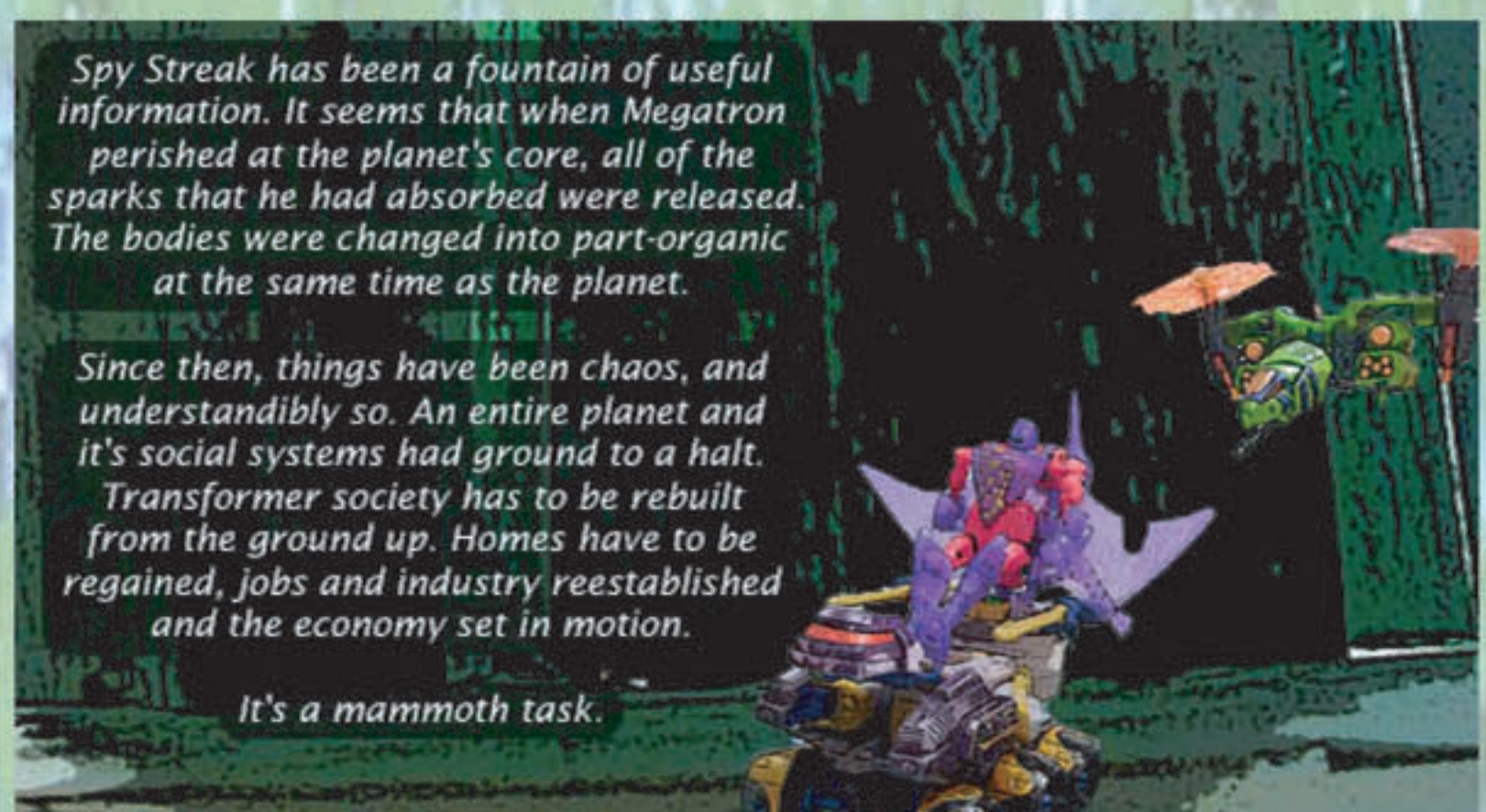
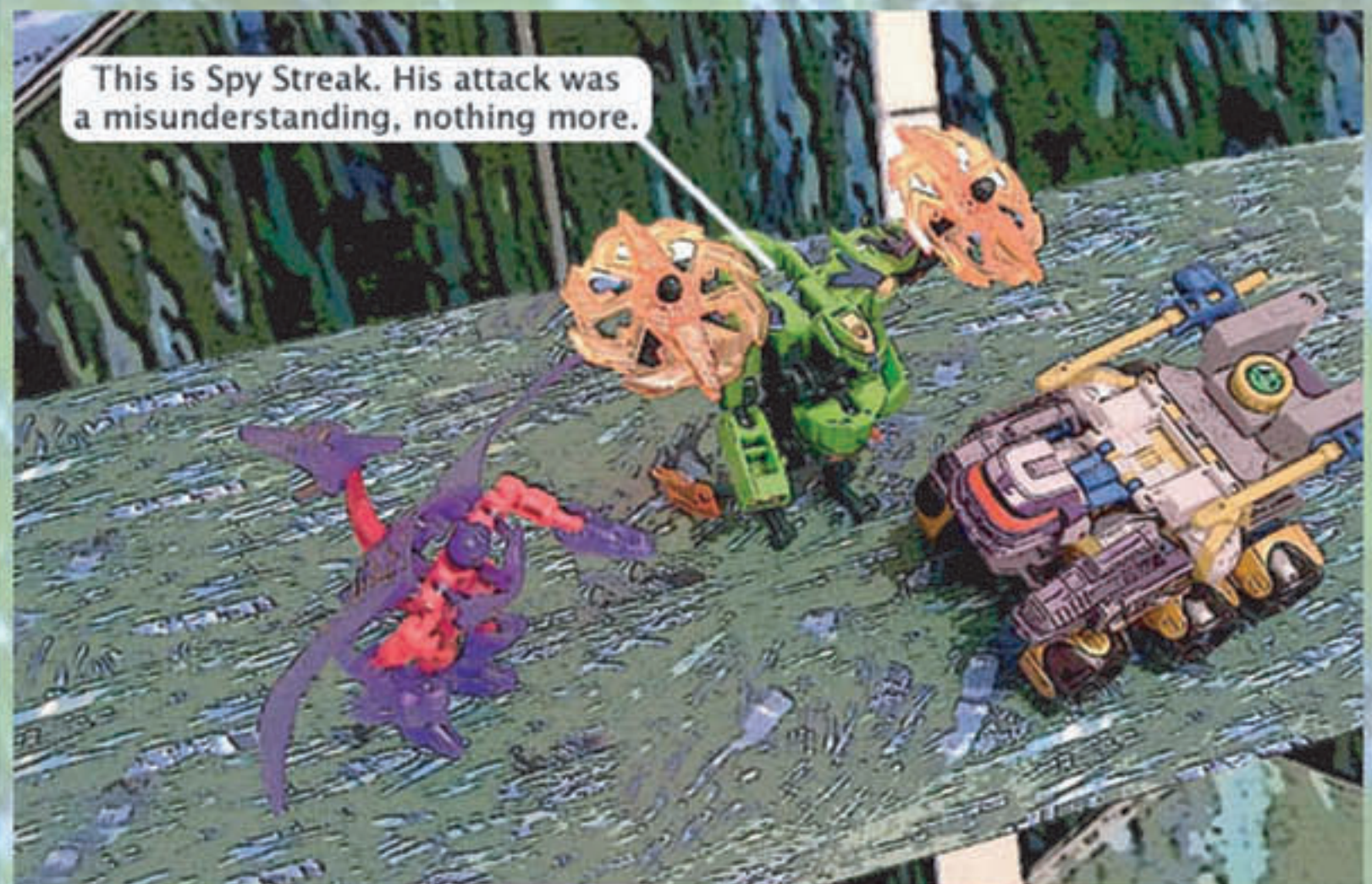
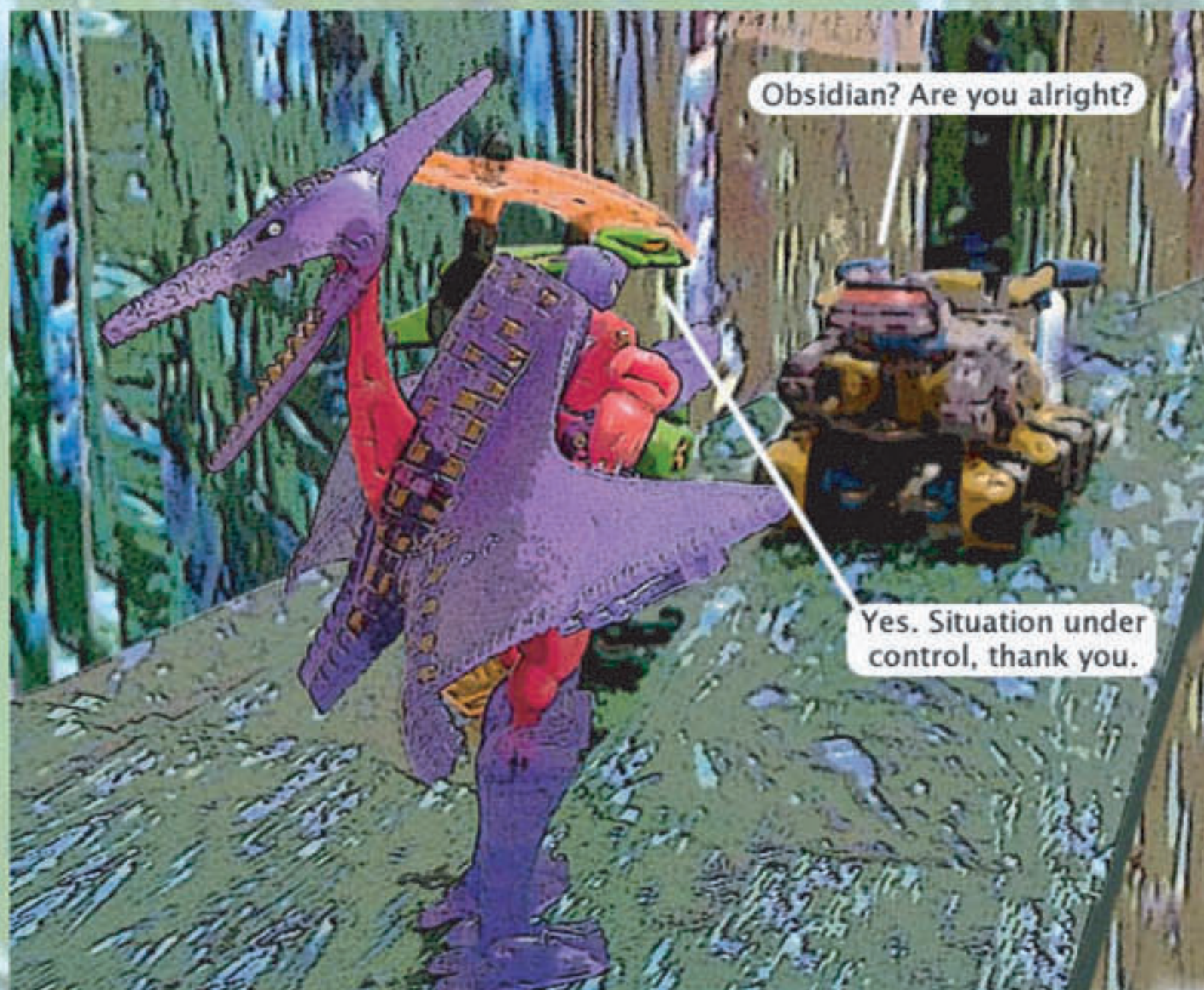


My name's Spy Streak. Former resident of apartment block Cobalt, former industrial power complex maintenance.

I am Obsidian. General and strategist.

.... I really did attack the wrong bot.









We've been spending our days surveying the city to see if our living quarters are still habitable. Some are, but some have been overgrown.

I see. And you are currently housed outside the city in a camp pending the assessment of housing.



Home sweet home. For now, anyway. Relocation camp gamma.

Hut TC 612.

Where are your fellow occupants?



I'm sure they'll be back soon. There's a recharging station not too far away.

How many of you live in this prefab?

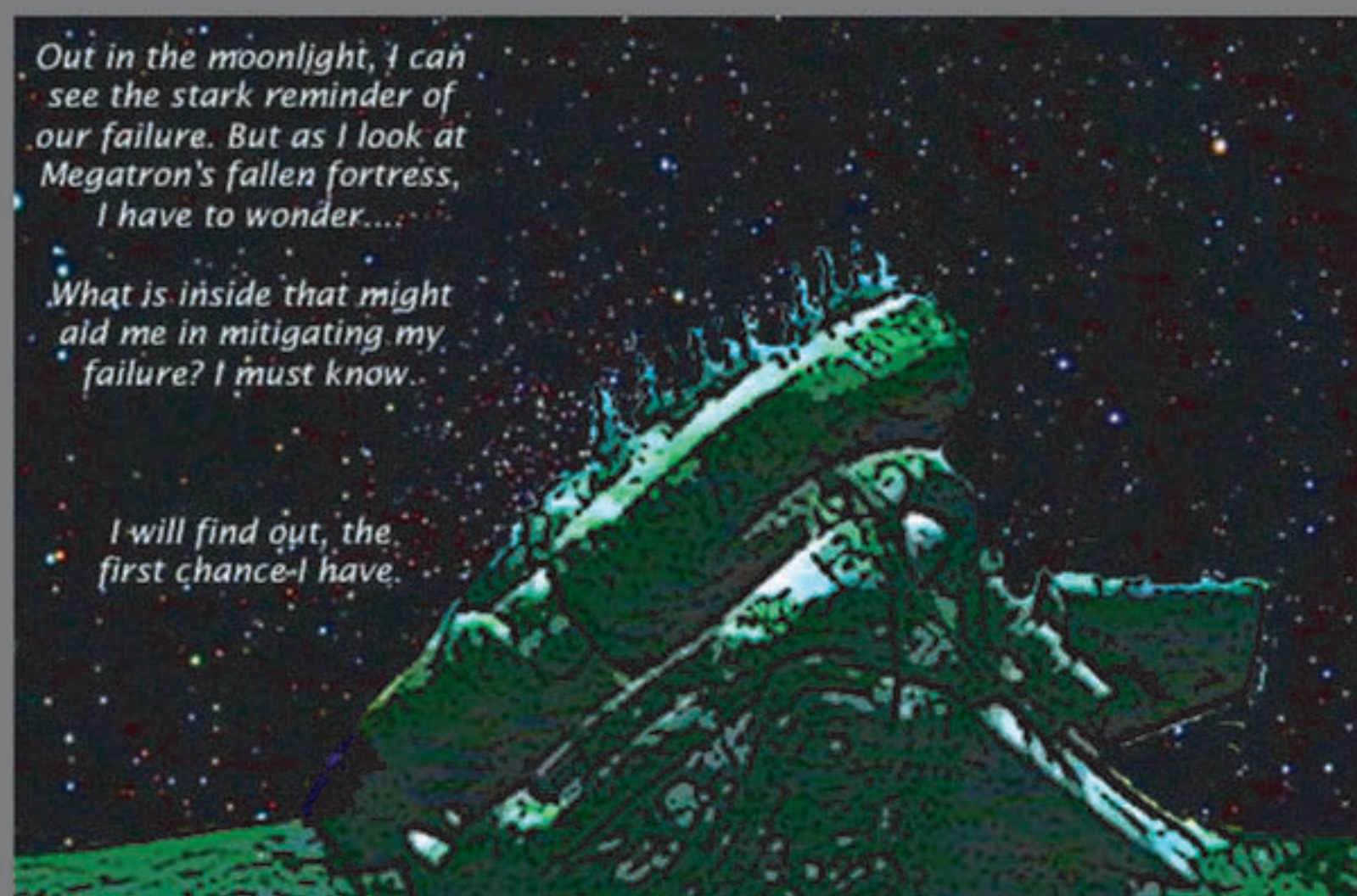
Three of us. There's me, Scavenger and Longhorn. It's a tight fit for three.



I suppose a recharge is in order while we..



Obsidian! Look out there!



*Out in the moonlight, I can see the stark reminder of our failure. But as I look at Megatron's fallen fortress, I have to wonder....*

*What is inside that might aid me in mitigating my failure? I must know.*

*I will find out, the first chance I have.*



Blackarachnia to Silverbolt. Yes, I still have them in sight. They're in one of the camps, out on the edge, with someone.

No, I can't hear what they're talking about. I'll try to get in closer if I can.





We need to explore Megatron's fortress.

I agree, but it's dangerous at this point. You do realize that the Maximals are surely watching our every move?



No doubt they are. What we need is a trustworthy ally who can examine it for us without getting caught.

Not Spy Streak. He doesn't seem very stable at all.

No.



What are you two talking about out there?

Just discussing some of the changes we've seen since returning home.

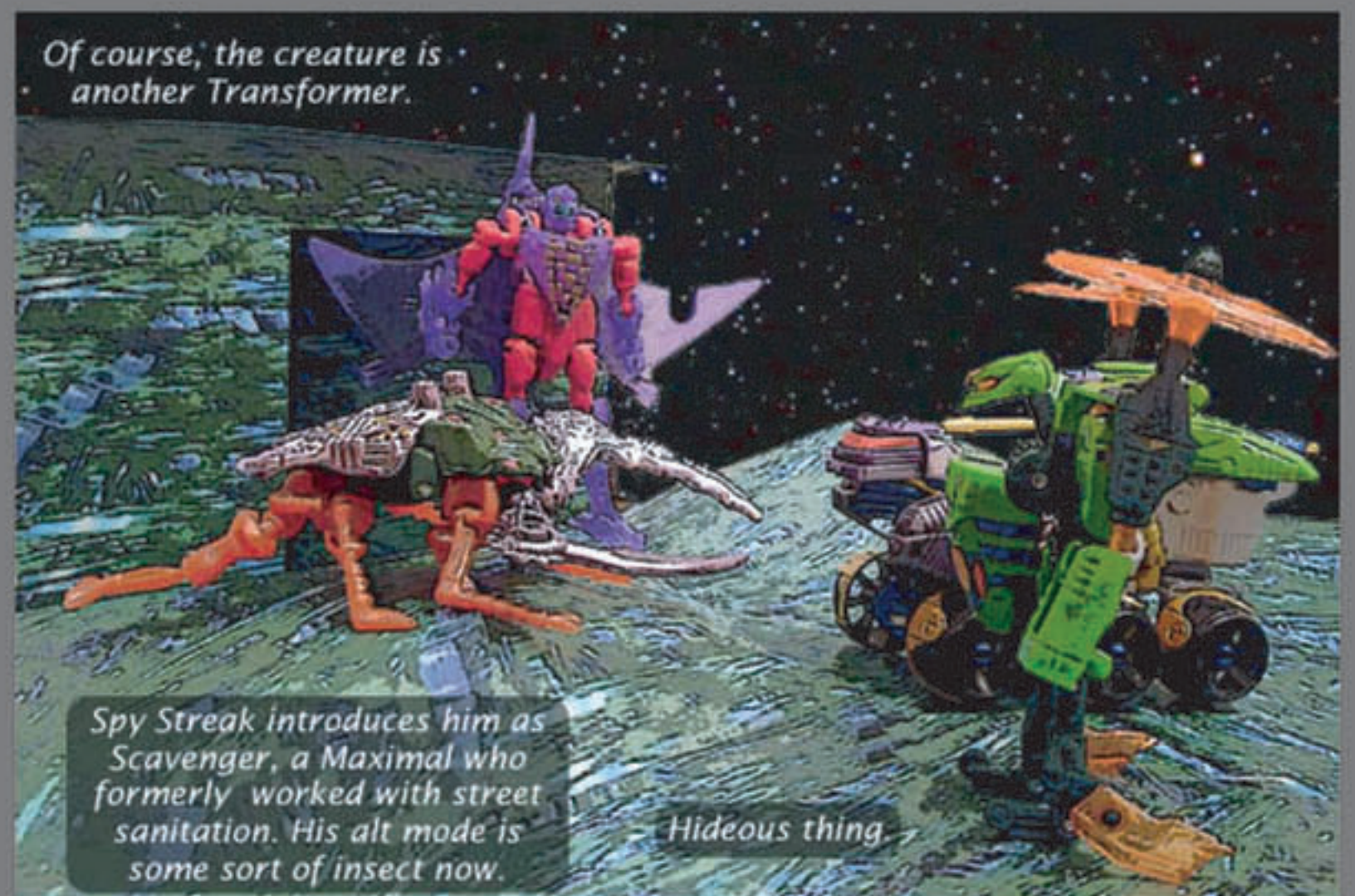


Changes like that!

By Primus! What is that thing?



What thing?



Of course, the creature is another Transformer.

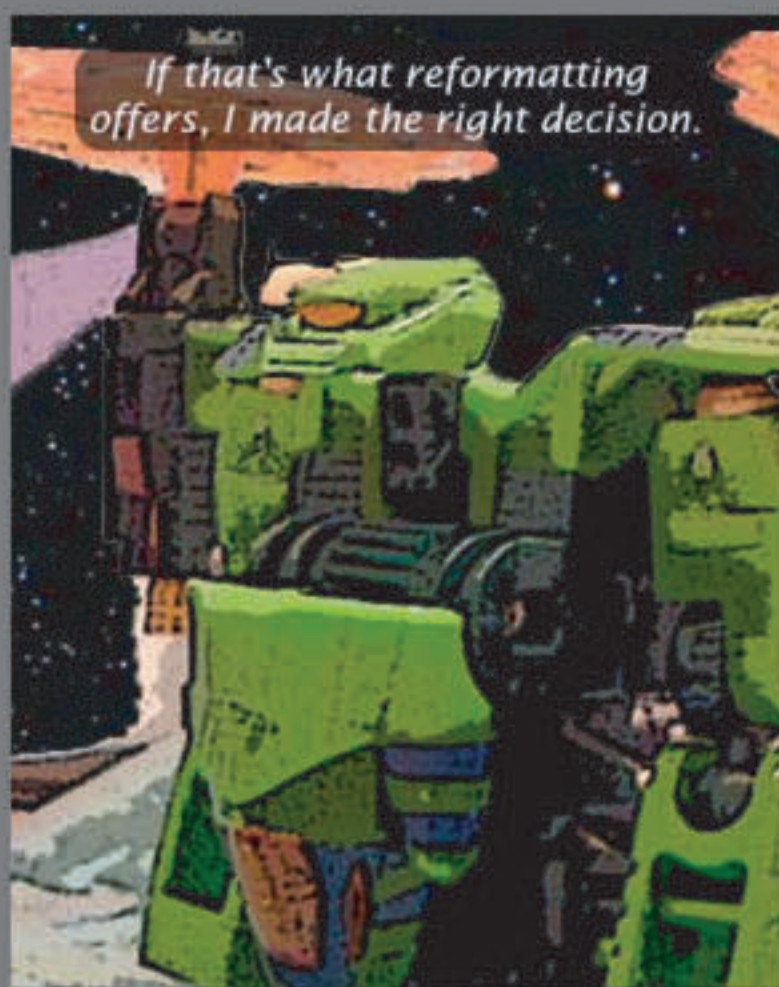
Spy Streak introduces him as Scavenger, a Maximal who formerly worked with street sanitation. His alt mode is some sort of insect now.

Hideous thing.





His robot mode is just as bad. Huge blades for hands, multiple legs... what a nightmare.



If that's what reformatting offers, I made the right decision.



Hi. I'd shake your hand, but you'd draw back a nub. Hahahahaha!

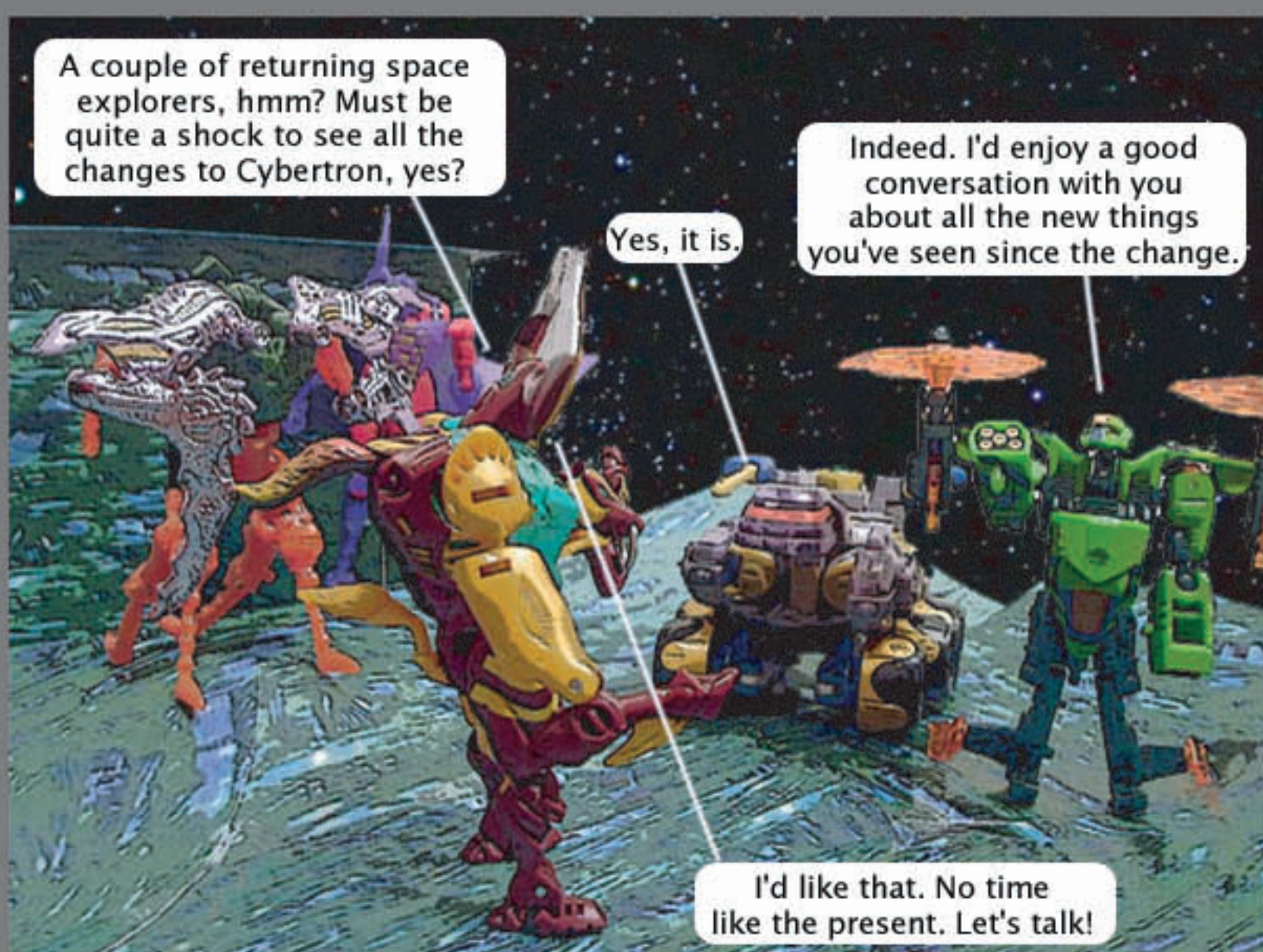


Then there is the third member of this trio. Another Maximal. Longhorn, a member of the Maximal military corps. He's a bull, apparently. Not as hideous as Scavenger, but every bit as impractical.

He's sizing us up, in much the same way that we've been taking his measure.



I am transformed!



A couple of returning space explorers, hmm? Must be quite a shock to see all the changes to Cybertron, yes?

Yes, it is.

Indeed. I'd enjoy a good conversation with you about all the new things you've seen since the change.

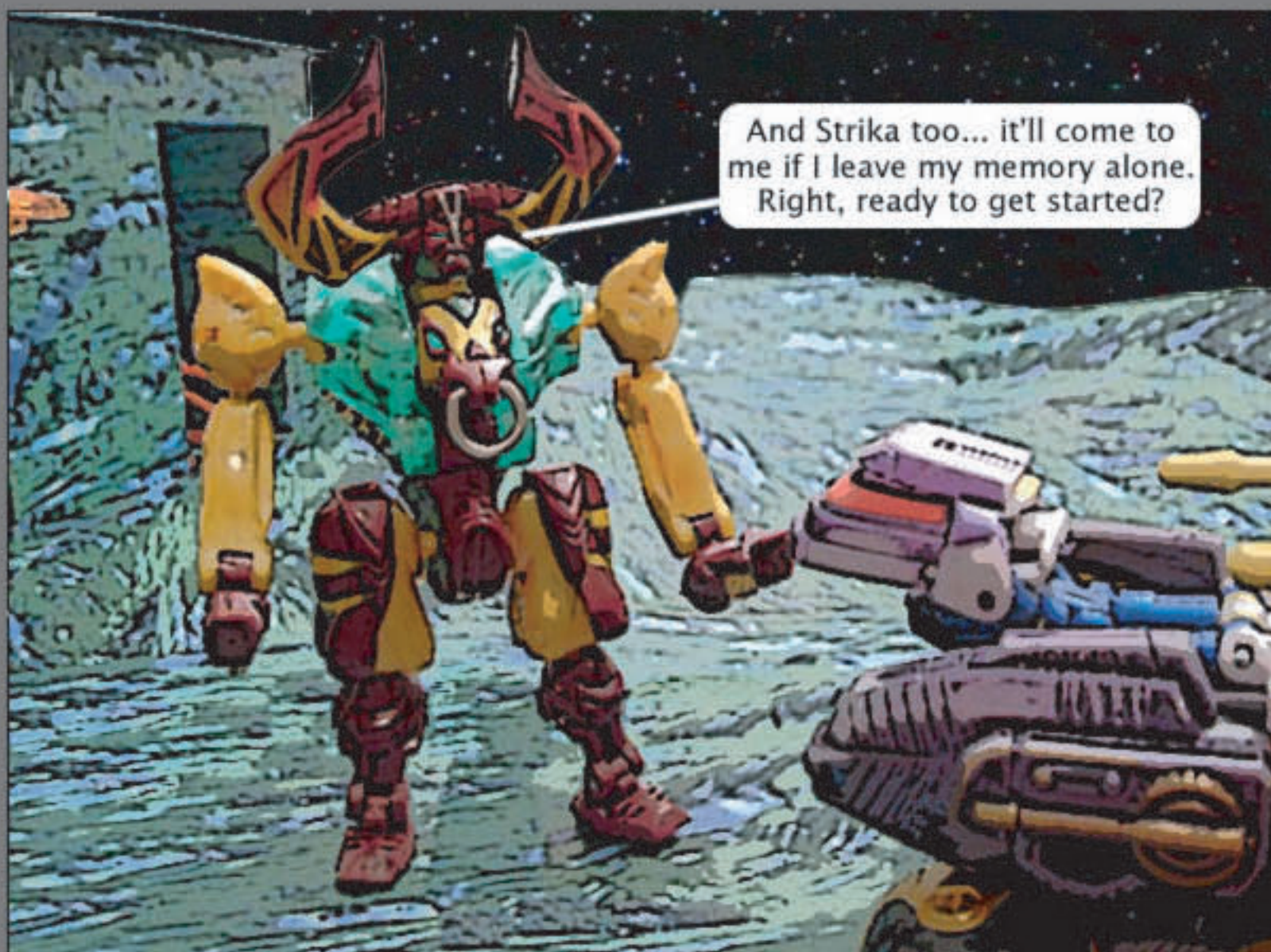
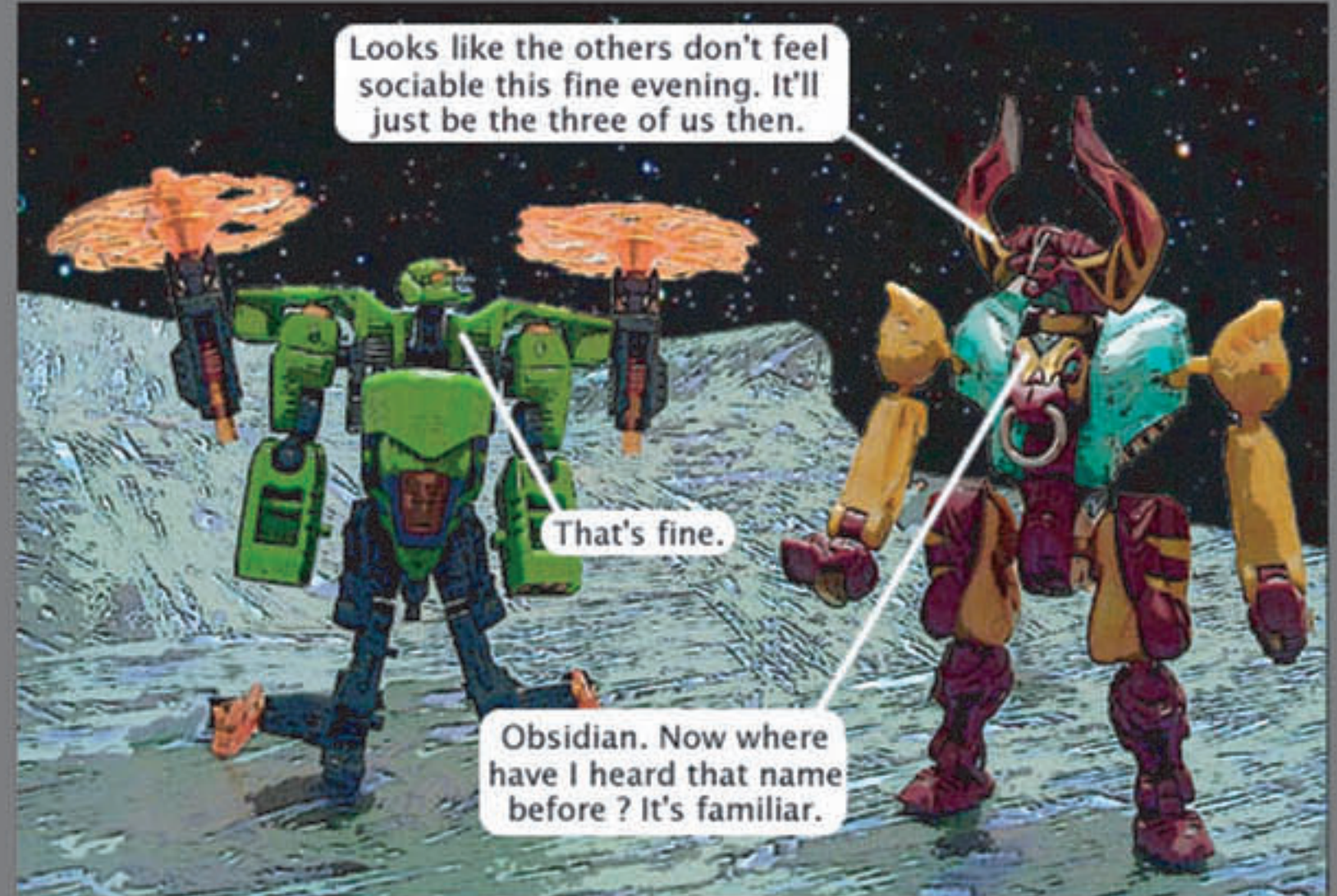
I'd like that. No time like the present. Let's talk!



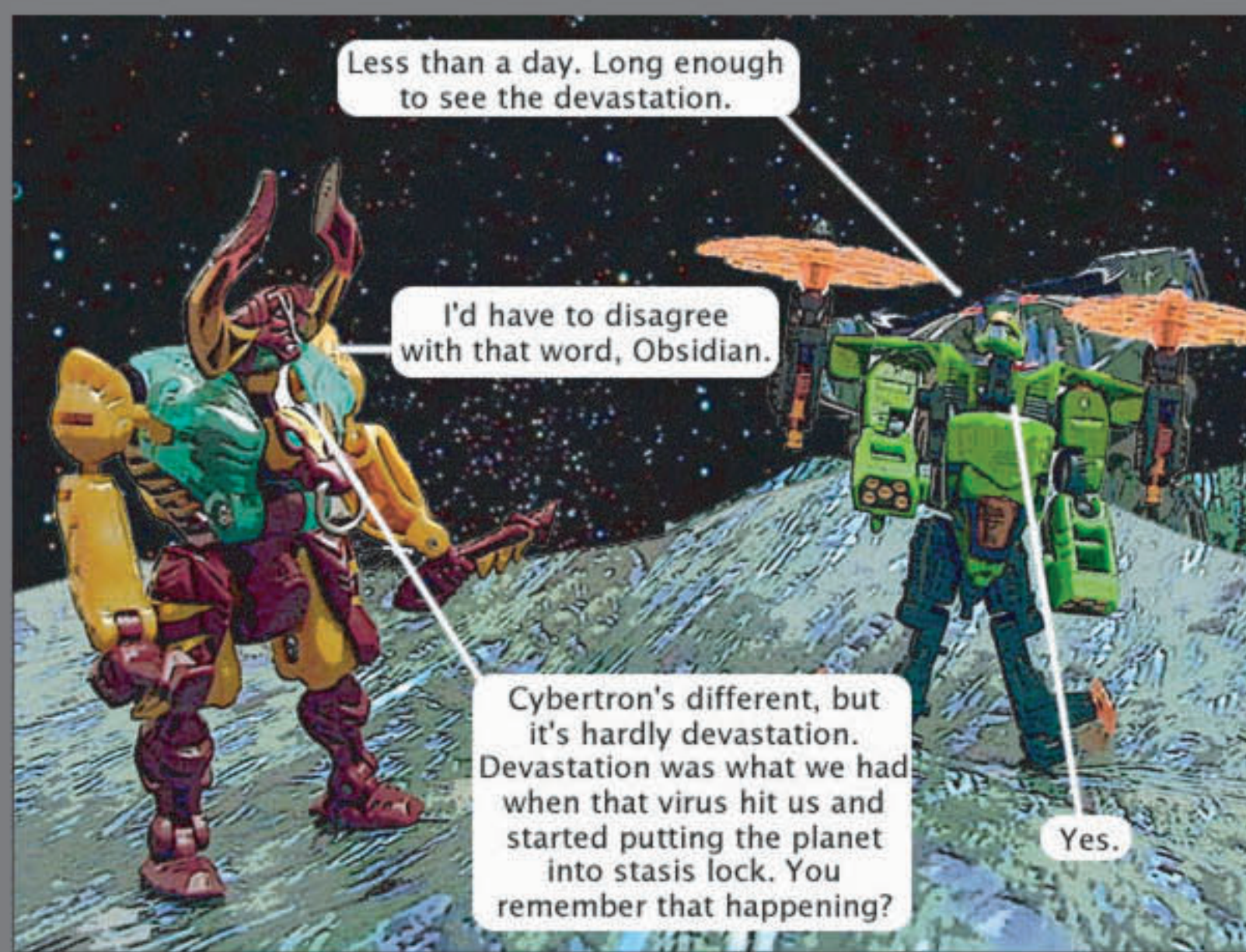
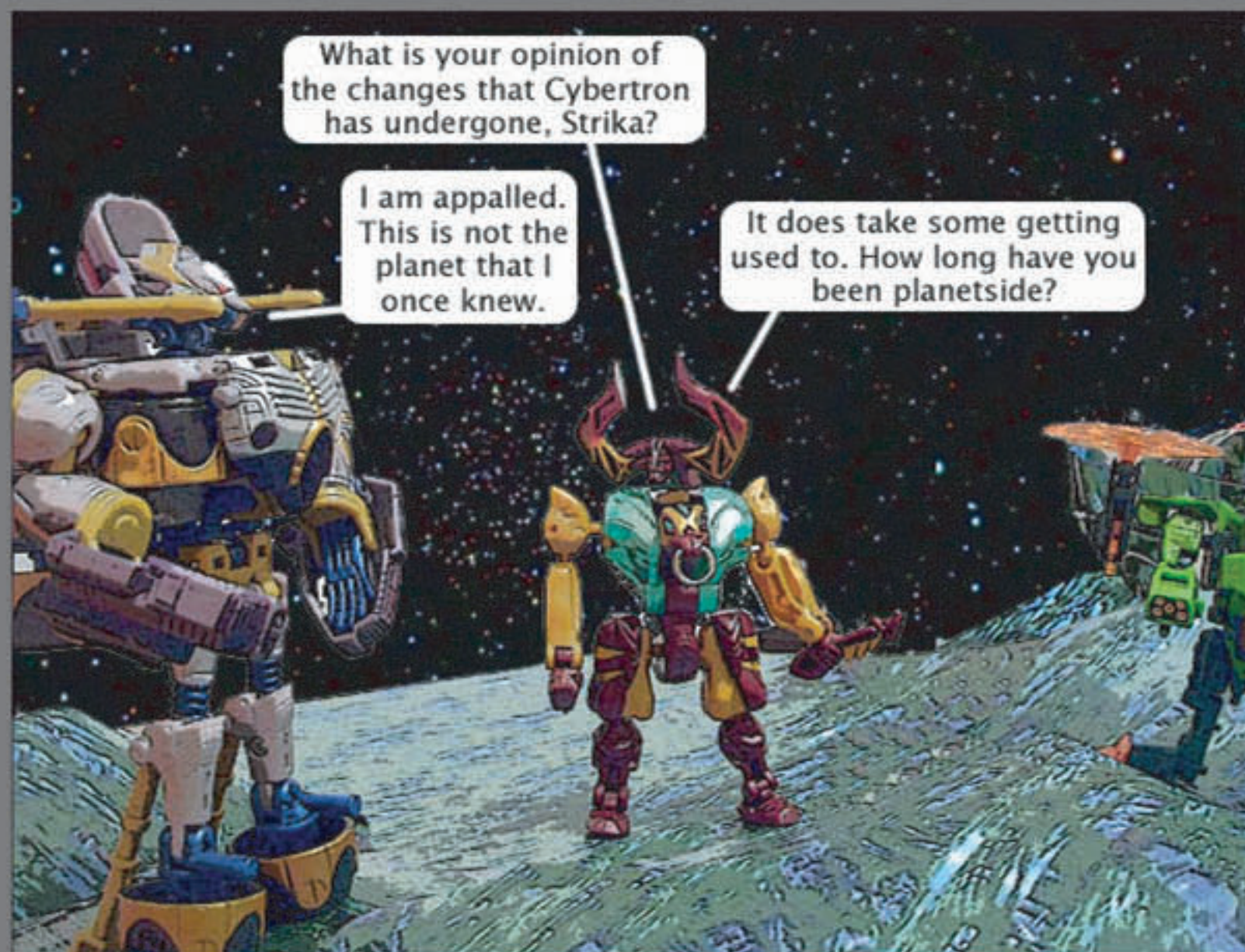
As Spy Streak told you, my name is Longhorn. How about you?

Does he know who we are? I don't know. I'm not sure what he could do if he did know.

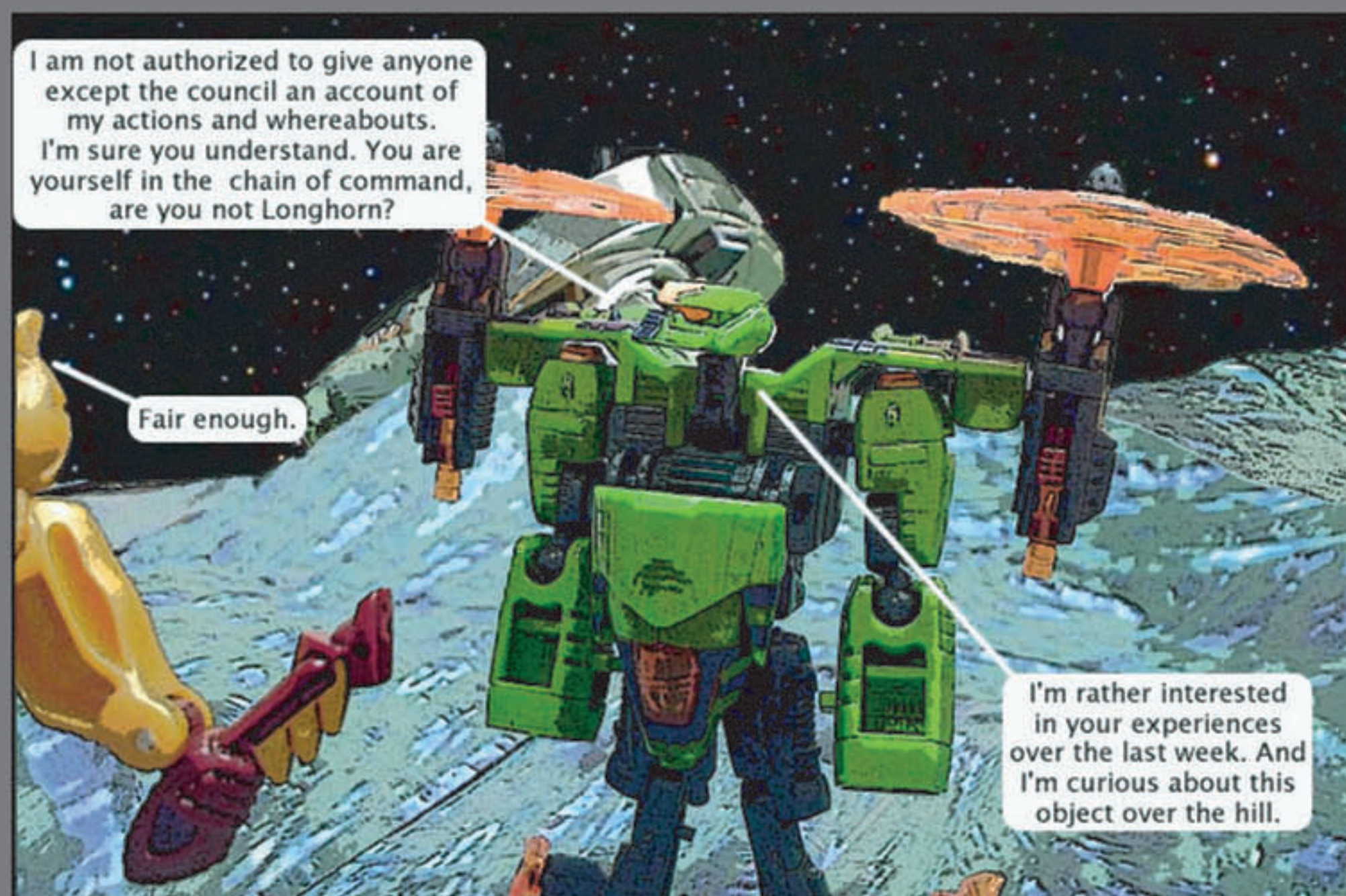




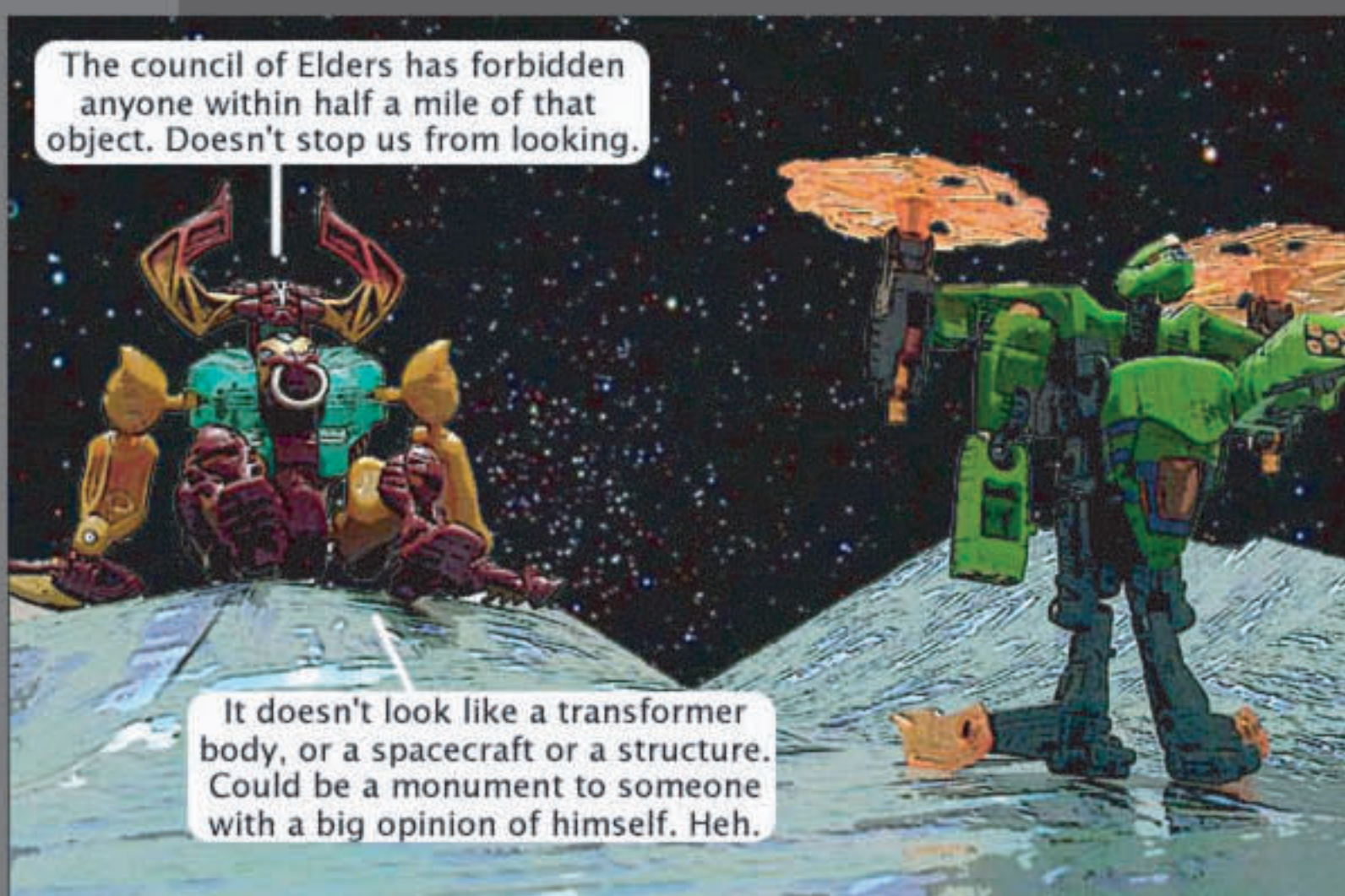
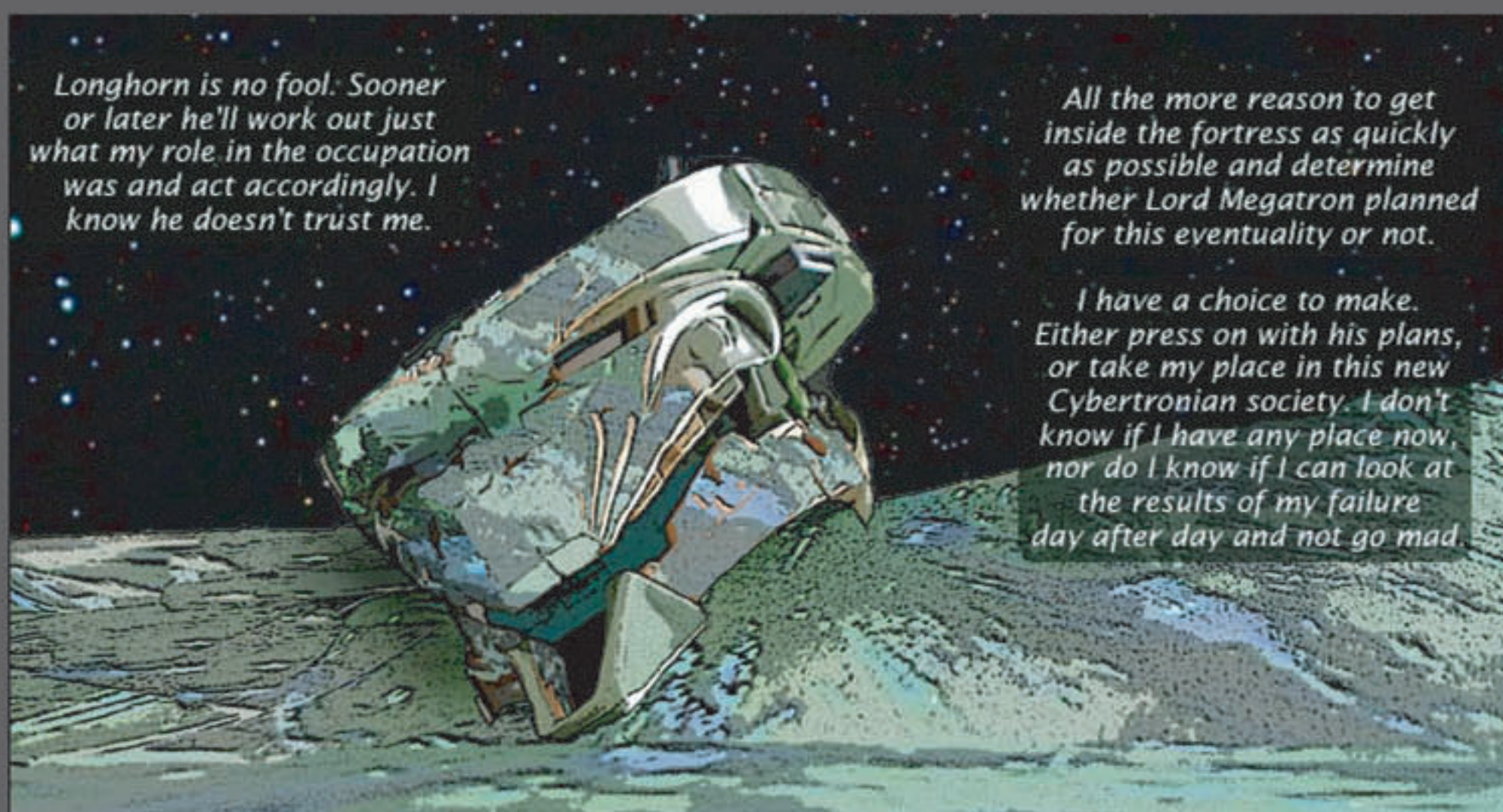
















How about you, General? You strike me as a bot of action. You think in terms of strategies, but I think you'd prefer real world application to pure speculative thought. Am I right?



Still trying to sound me out, aren't you?



I'd have said that I was trying to get to know you.

But if it's deep, probing questions you like, try this one out for size: if you could change the planet back to the way it was, would you? Would you deny the population the freedom to choose their destiny?



Did you have any choice about becoming technorganic?

No.

Does it bother you that your free will was violated?

Yes, absolutely. But as I told Strika, I've come to see our current state of existence as a good thing.



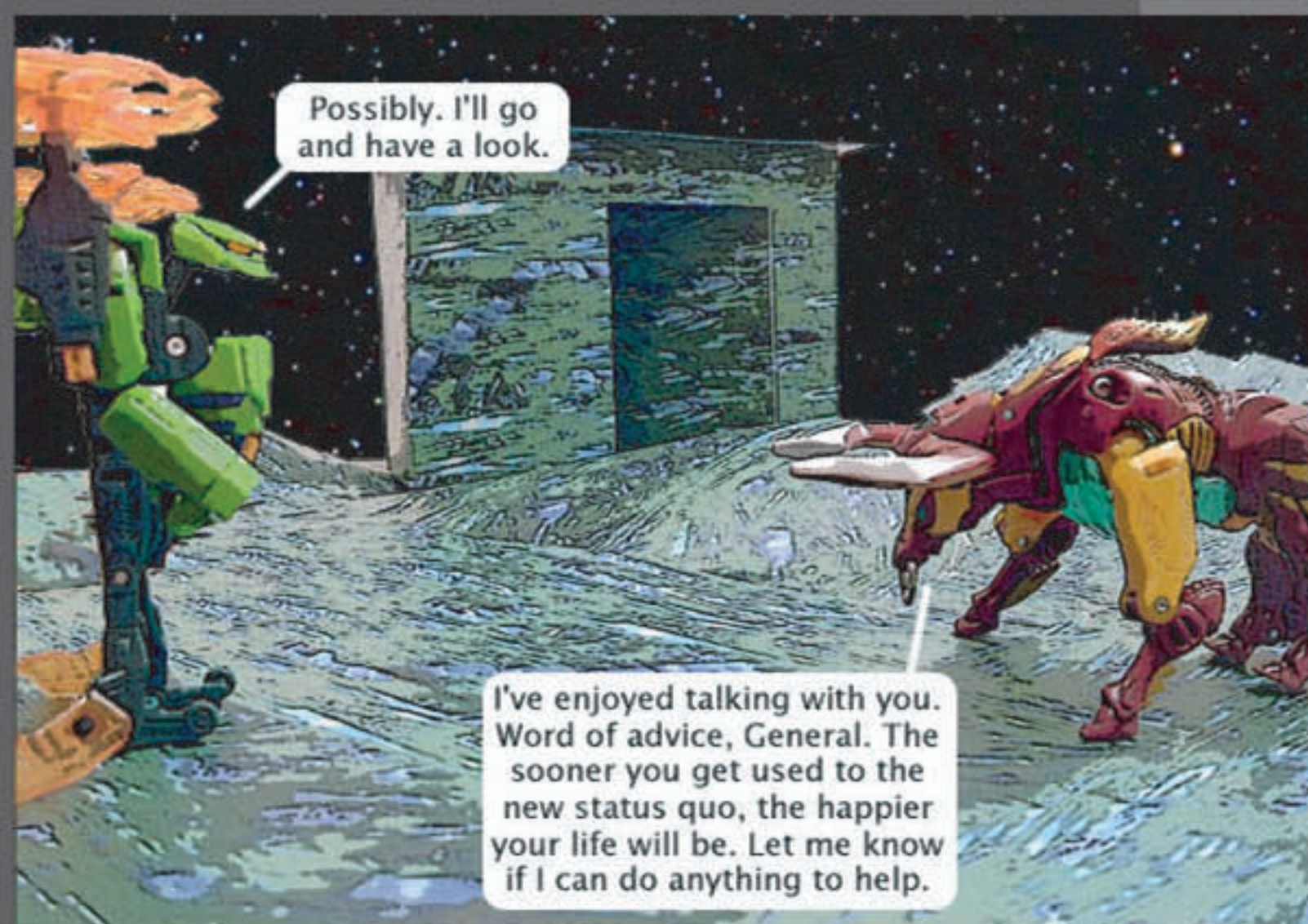
Not for me.

In answer to your question Longhorn, if I knew how it could be accomplished, I would change Cybertron back to the way it was without a second thought.



Strika?

She's probably having a look around the camp. The rechargers are a little south of us.



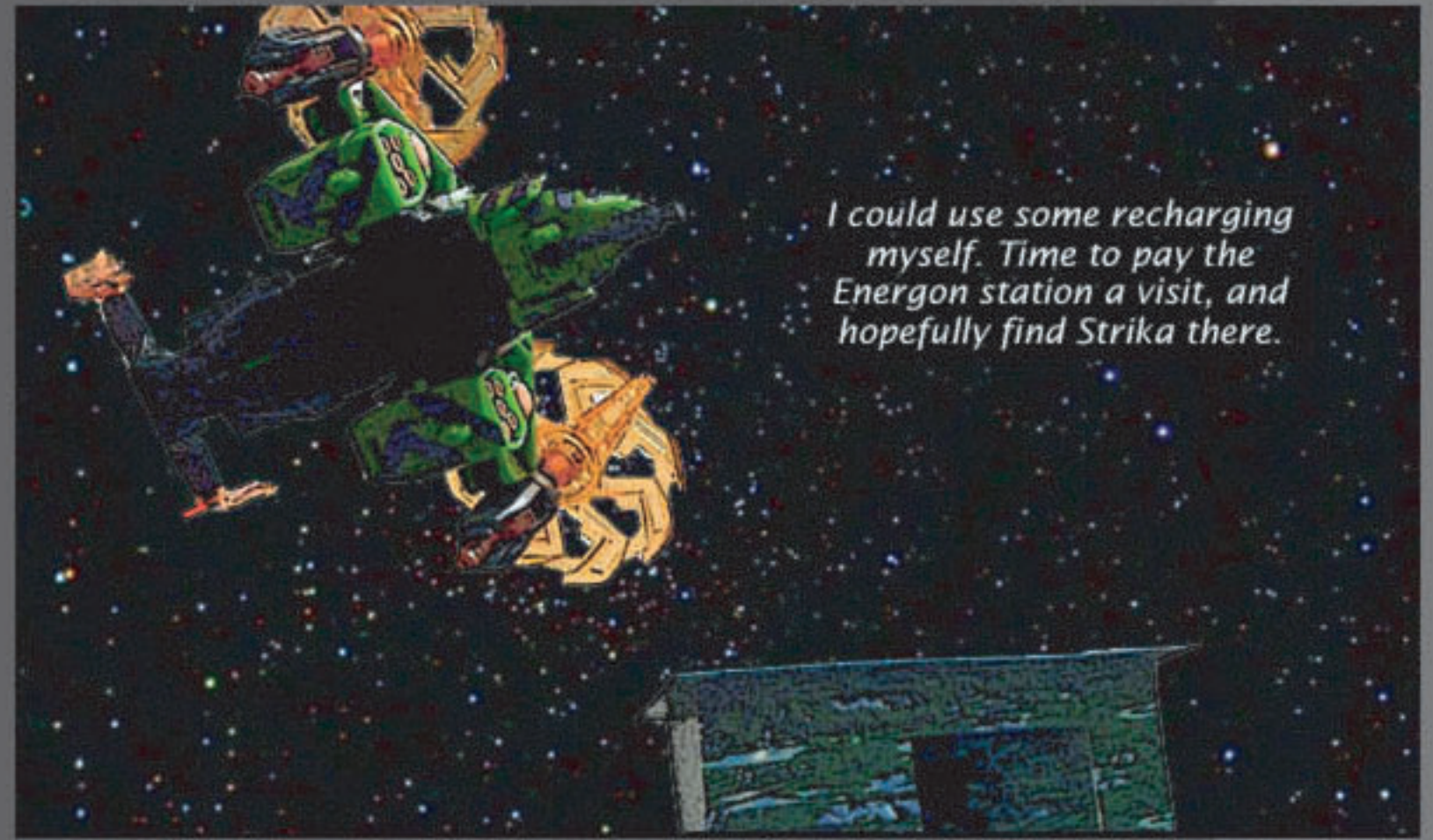
Possibly. I'll go and have a look.

I've enjoyed talking with you. Word of advice, General. The sooner you get used to the new status quo, the happier your life will be. Let me know if I can do anything to help.





How very Maximal of him.



I could use some recharging myself. Time to pay the Energon station a visit, and hopefully find Strika there.

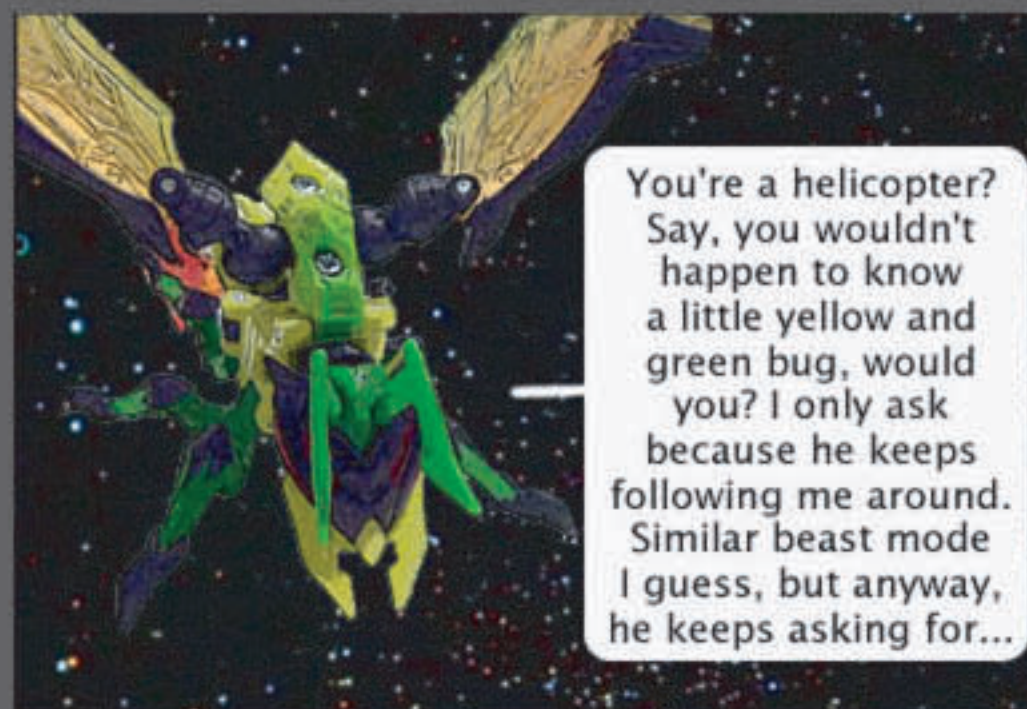


It'll be interesting to see the camp in the daylight. I'm curious about the Maximals. They live here for now while the city is surveyed and repaired, and homes opened up for living again. Prefabs shelter them.



Hello! Hey, you're a techie still!

I suppose I'd better get used to being the odd bot out, and having my appearance remarked upon by curious bots.

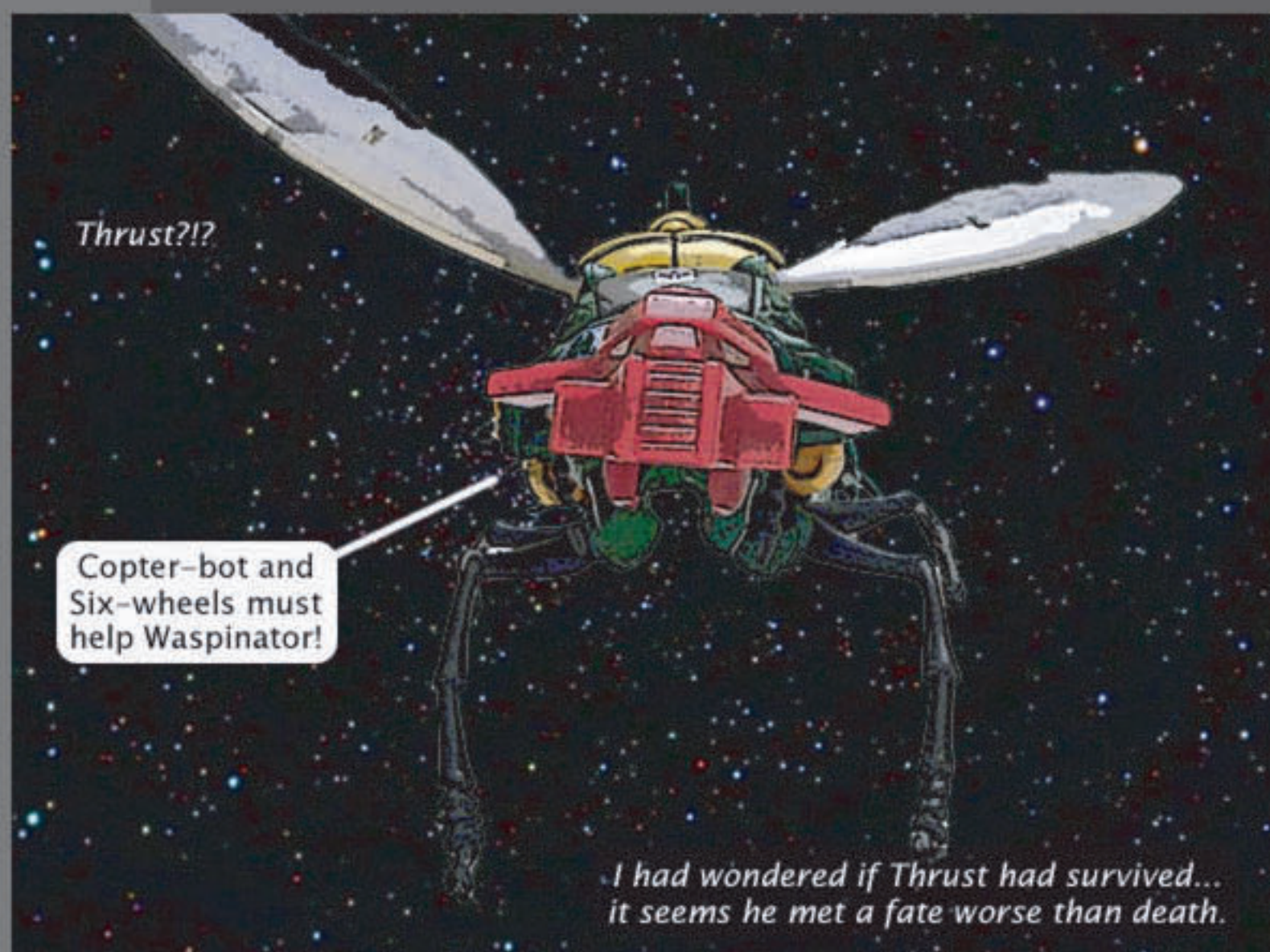


You're a helicopter? Say, you wouldn't happen to know a little yellow and green bug, would you? I only ask because he keeps following me around. Similar beast mode I guess, but anyway, he keeps asking for...



Copter-bot!

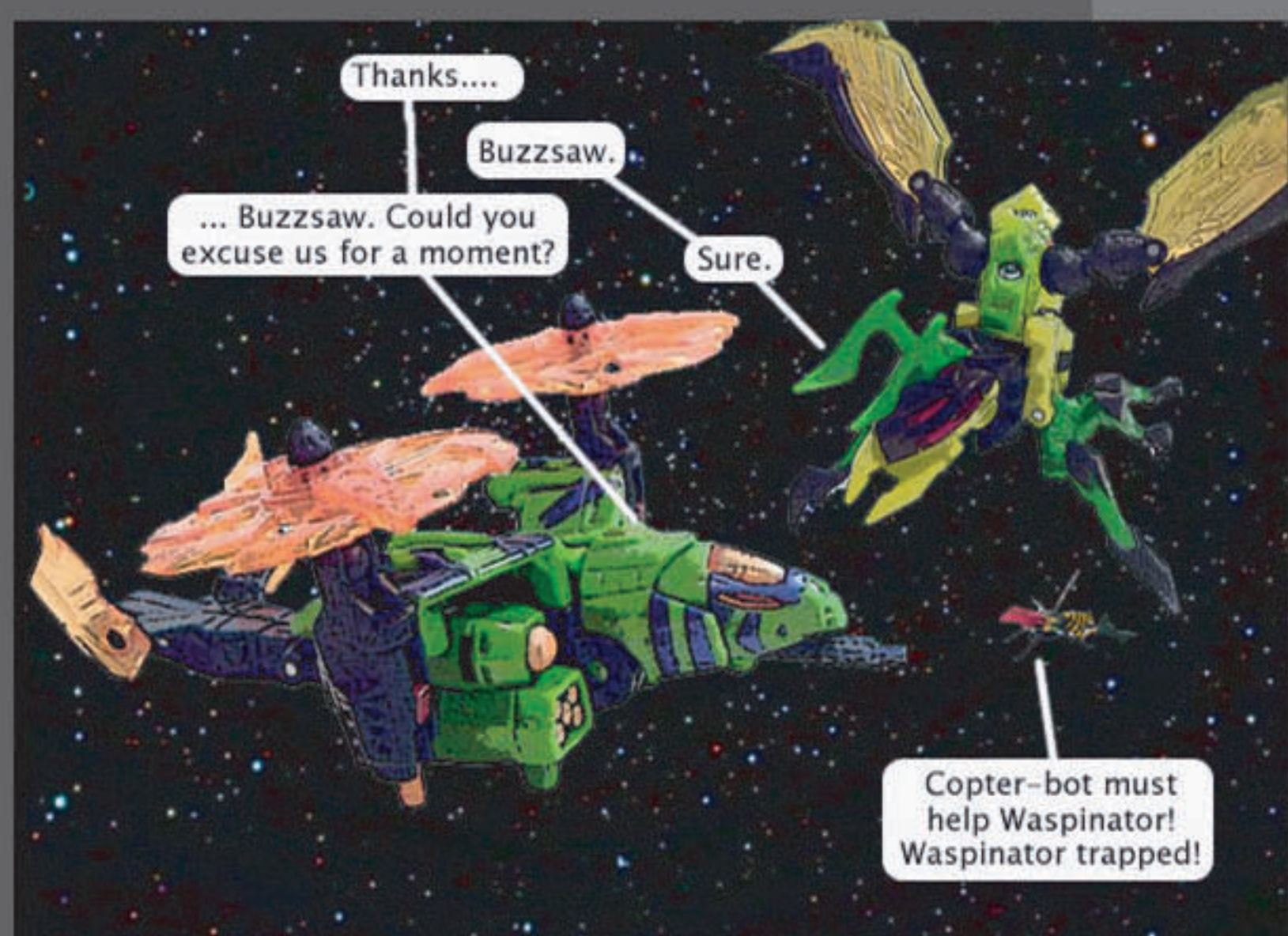
It can't be...



Thrust?!?

Copter-bot and Six-wheels must help Waspinator!

I had wondered if Thrust had survived... it seems he met a fate worse than death.



Thanks....

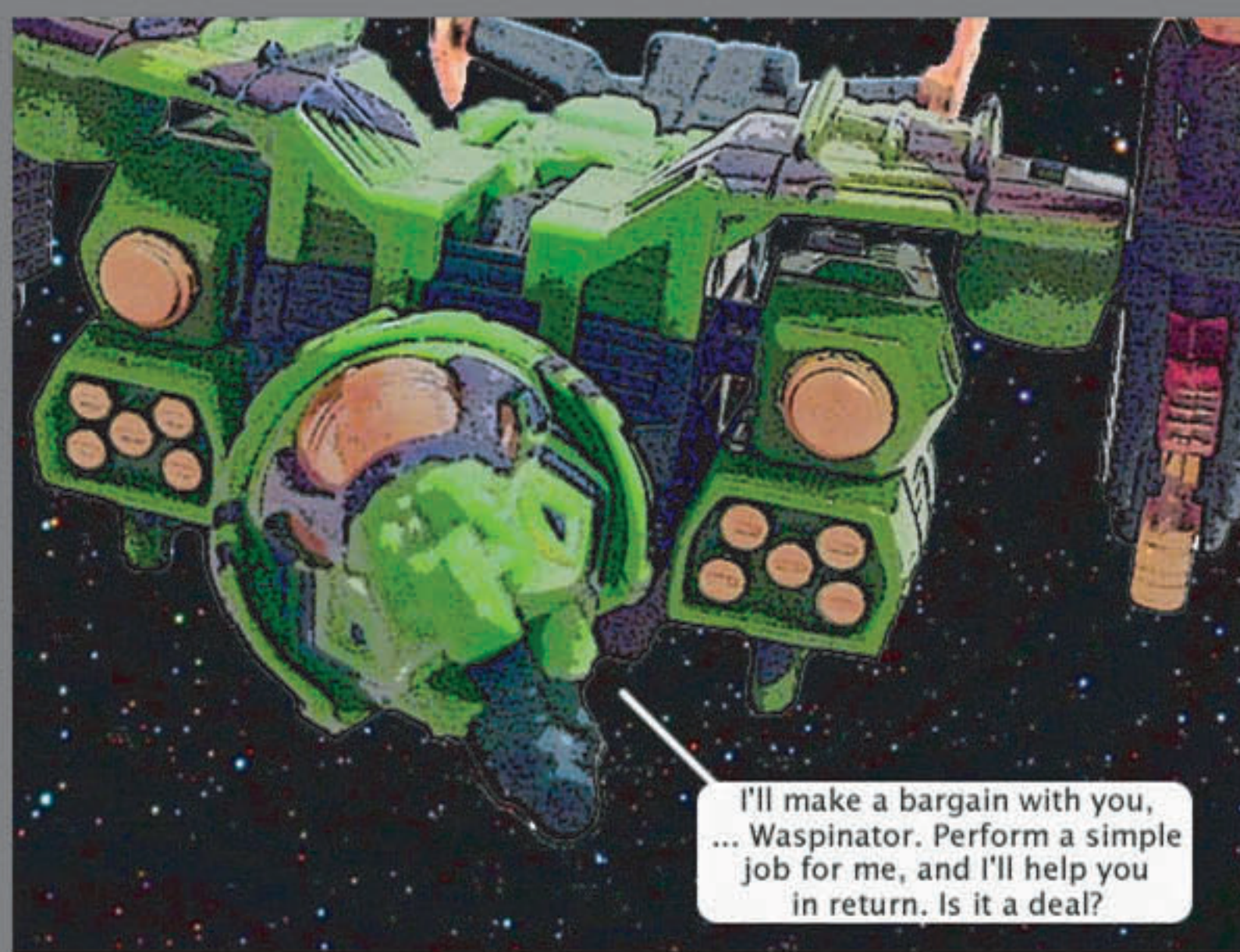
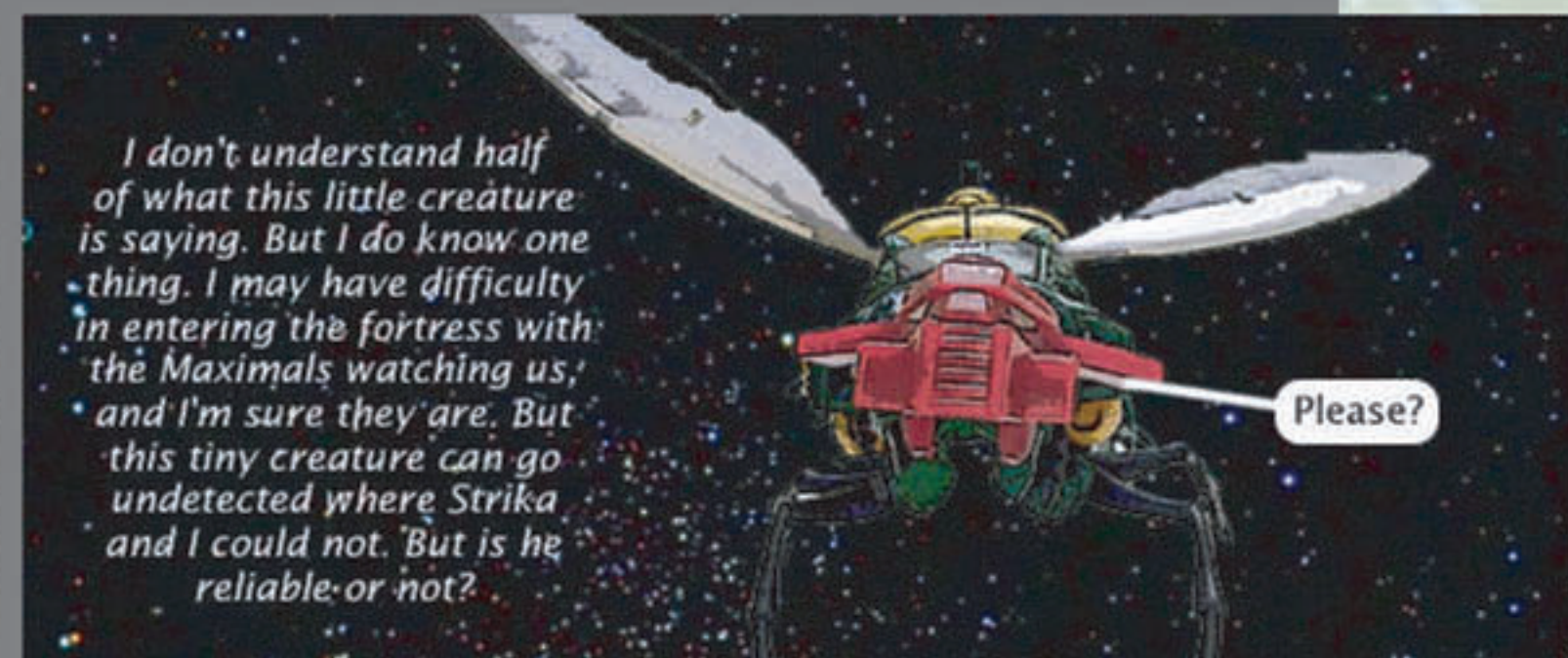
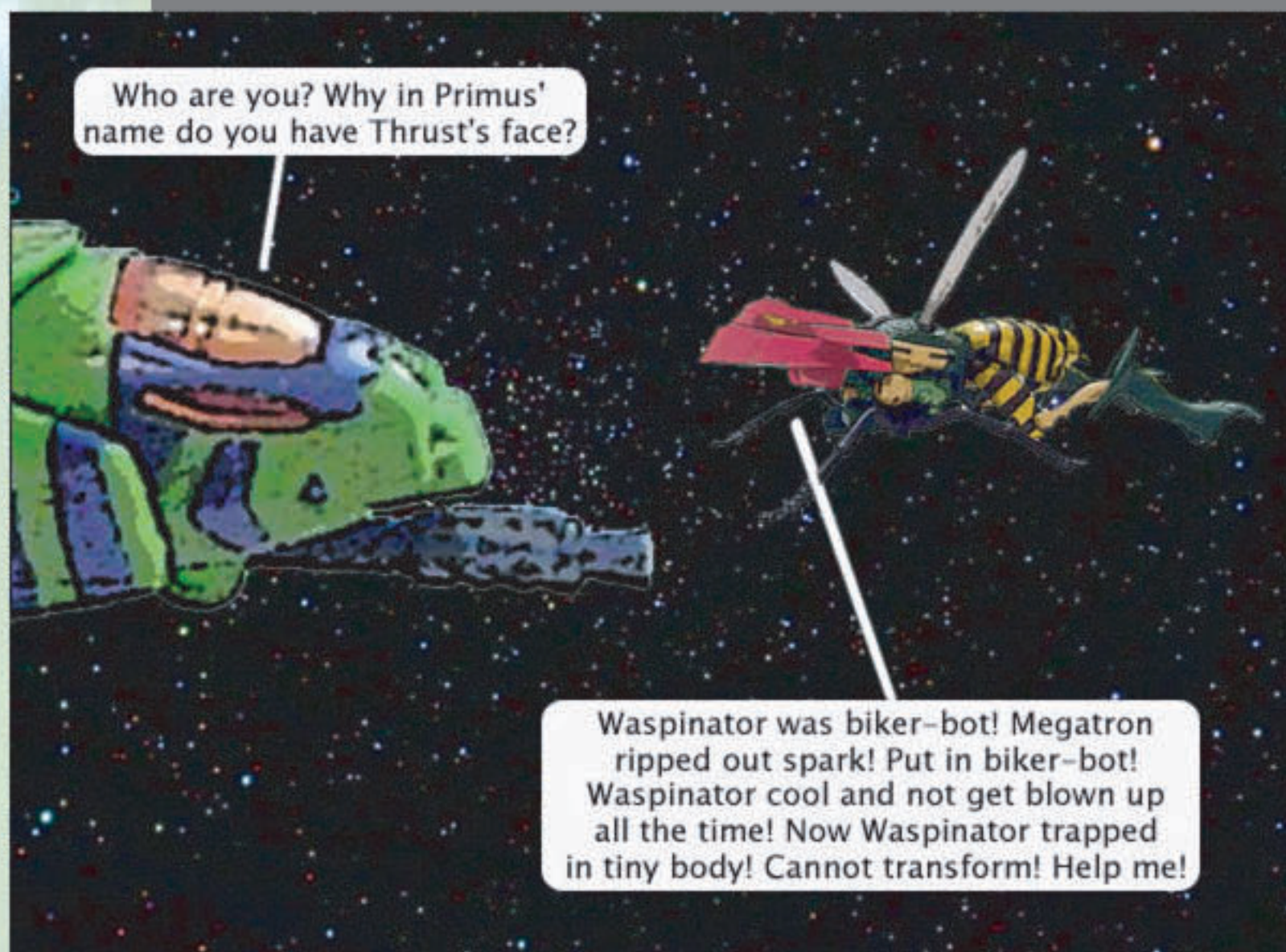
Buzzsaw.

... Buzzsaw. Could you excuse us for a moment?

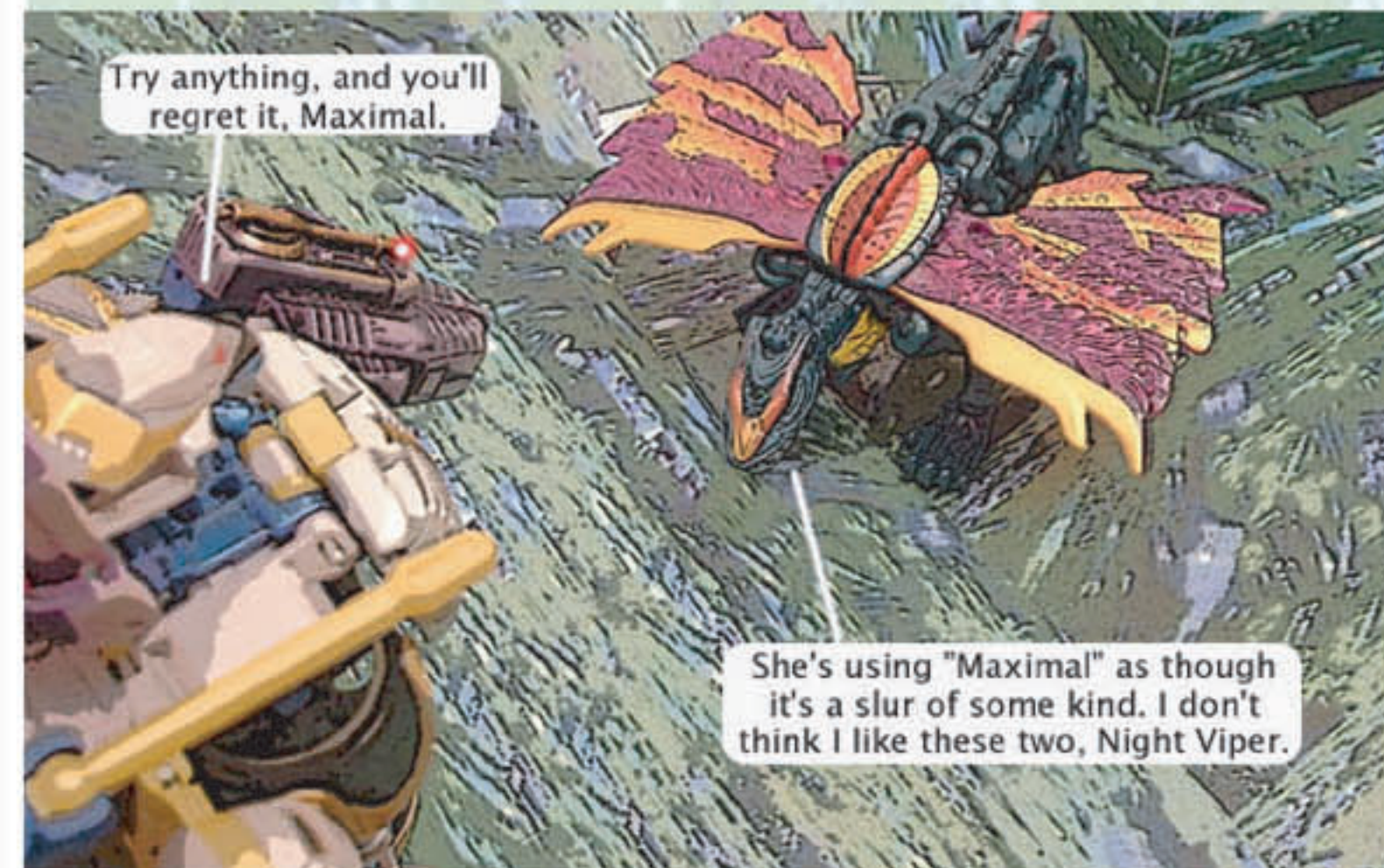
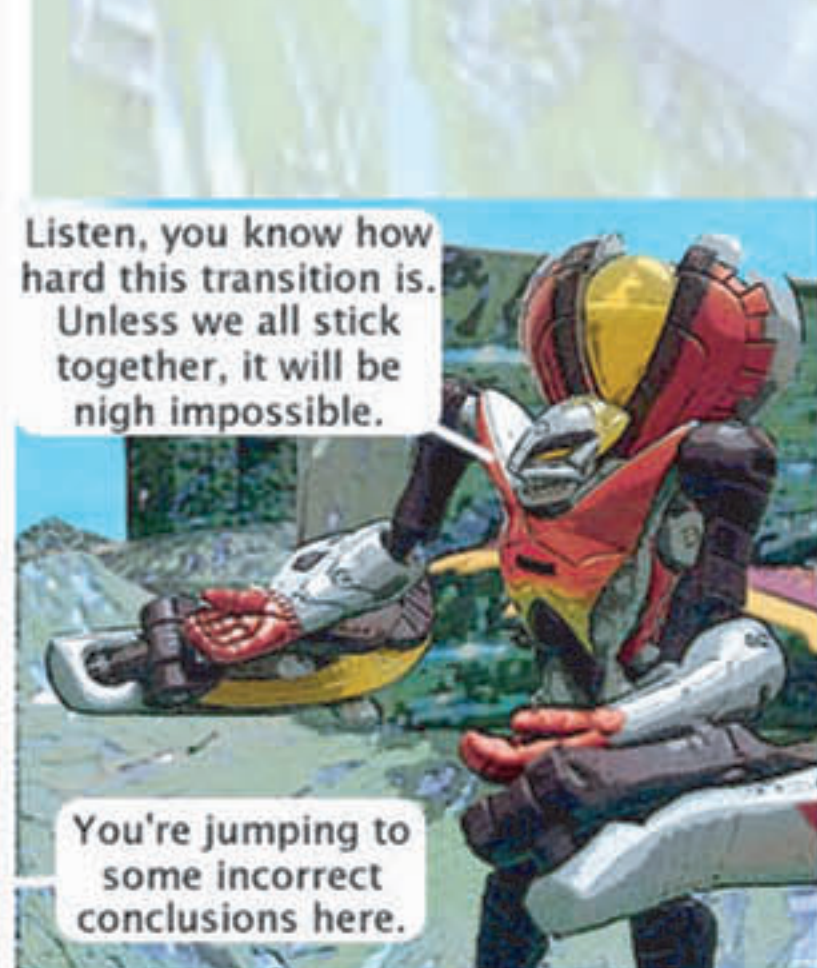
Sure.

Copter-bot must help Waspinator! Waspinator trapped!











I'd like an explanation Undermine. Who are these two? Why aren't they helping open up the city for habitation like the rest of us?

Because they have business elsewhere.

I'm afraid Cheetor spoke, ah... out of turn when he granted you amnesty. The council isn't happy about not having their say in the matter.

Amnesty?

Generals, your presence is required by the Maximal Council of Elders, now.

I can't say I'm surprised. May I ask why though?

Why would they need amnesty? What have they done, Undermine?

That's not your concern Geckobot.

That's what I'd expect from a Predacon.

Enough Geckobot! We're all in this together now!

Some of us.

Generals, this way please.

Very well.

Do you mean to submit still?

For now. Let's see what the bug brings us.

Way to go, snakeface.

Quiet. Let's get to work.

Bug? Hmmm...



# THE COUNCIL OF ELDERS

Megatron's fortress. Formerly the Council Citadel, now returned to its former occupants. There's still debris everywhere from our attack on Primal's group of Maximals, the first time I ever encountered them. Had I finished the job then, Cybertron would not be in the state it is now.



Ha! Looks like someone hasn't bothered to clean up their room yet!

Keep moving General Strika.



Elsewhere...

Nrooo... Waspinator find information for copter-bot! Get out of tiny body! Waspinator be happy again!

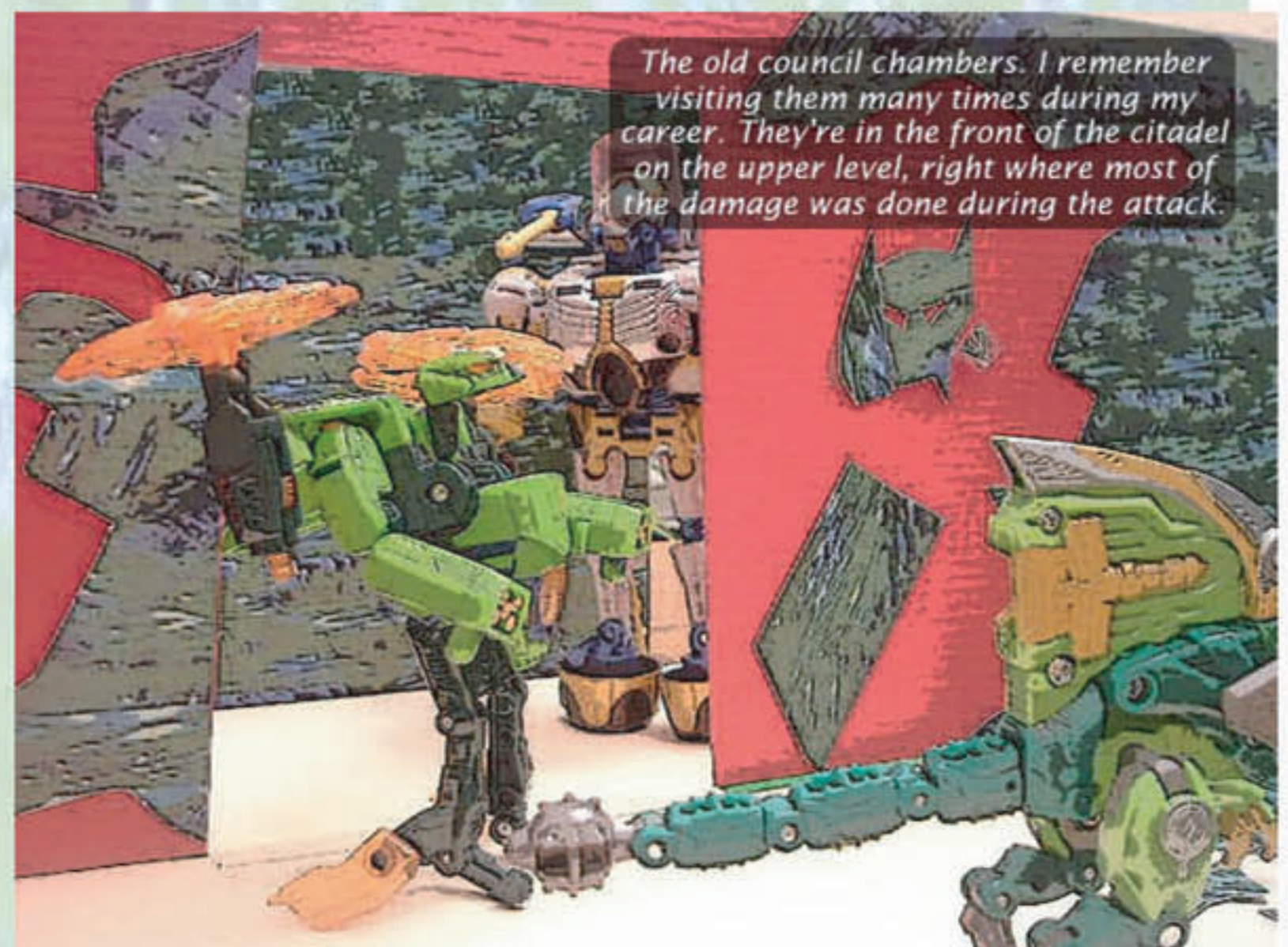


The Council Chamber

Councillors? We have brought the Generals.



The old council chambers. I remember visiting them many times during my career. They're in the front of the citadel on the upper level, right where most of the damage was done during the attack.

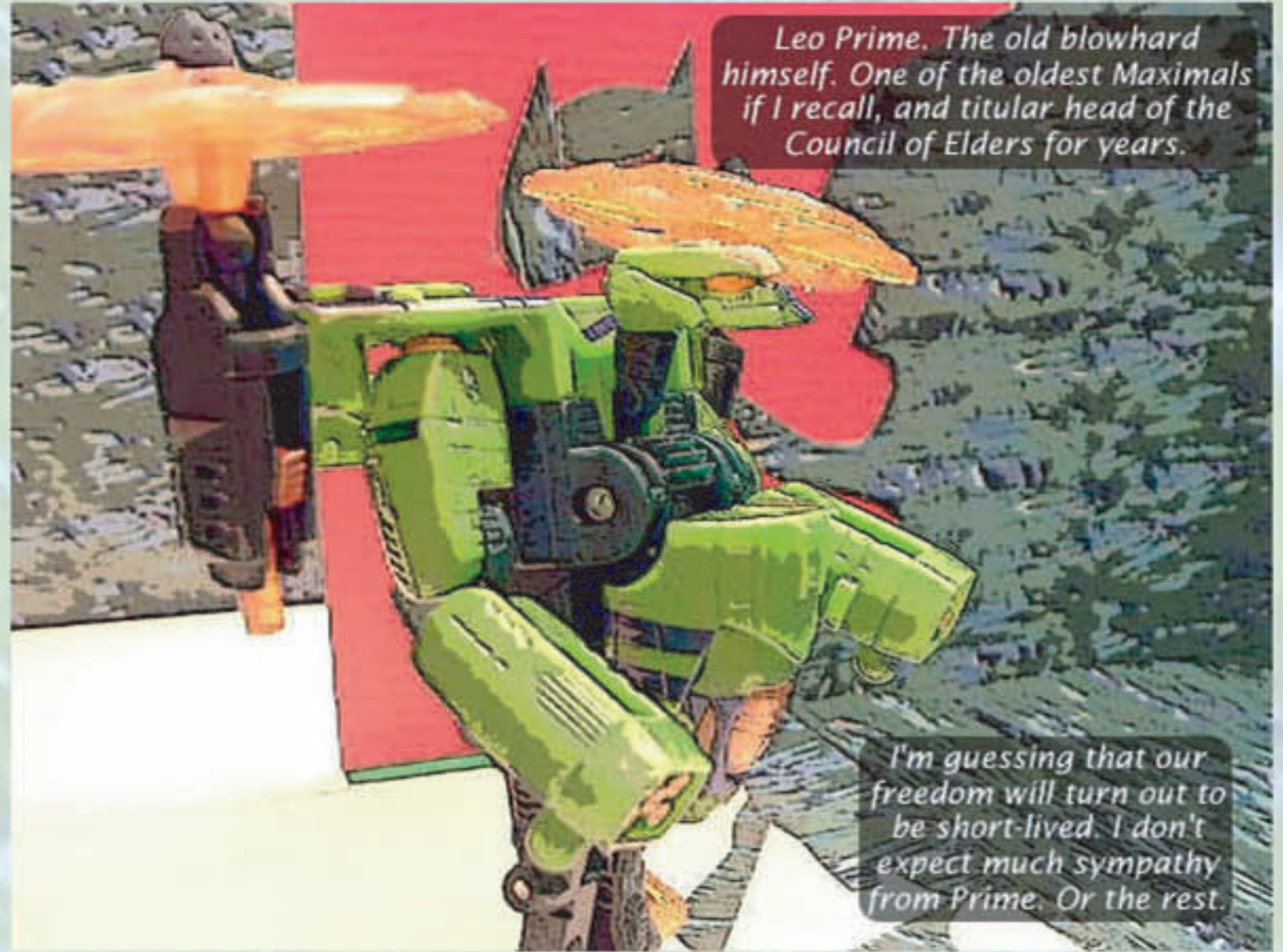






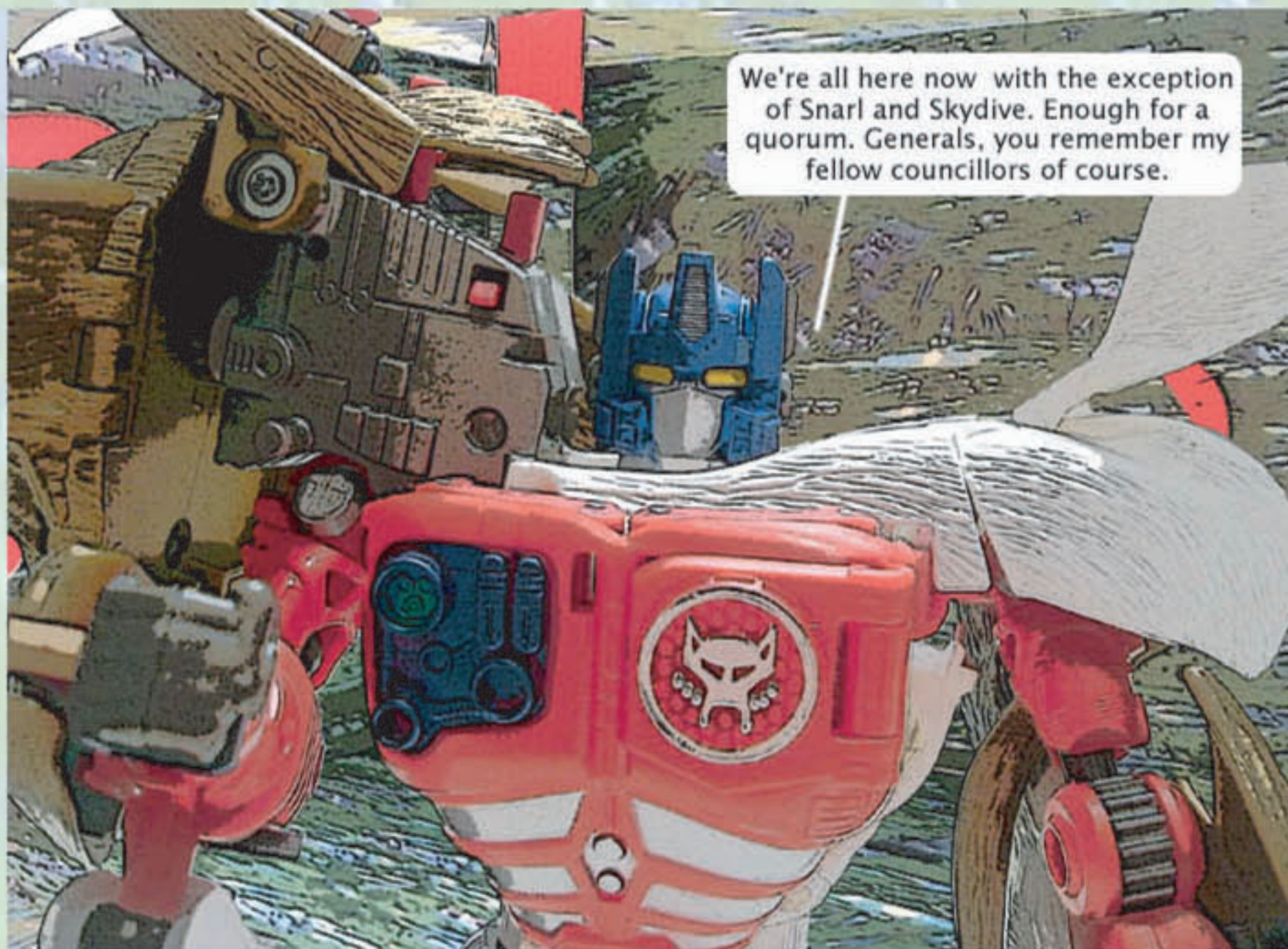
Very good. You and Sonar stand guard outside please.

Sir.

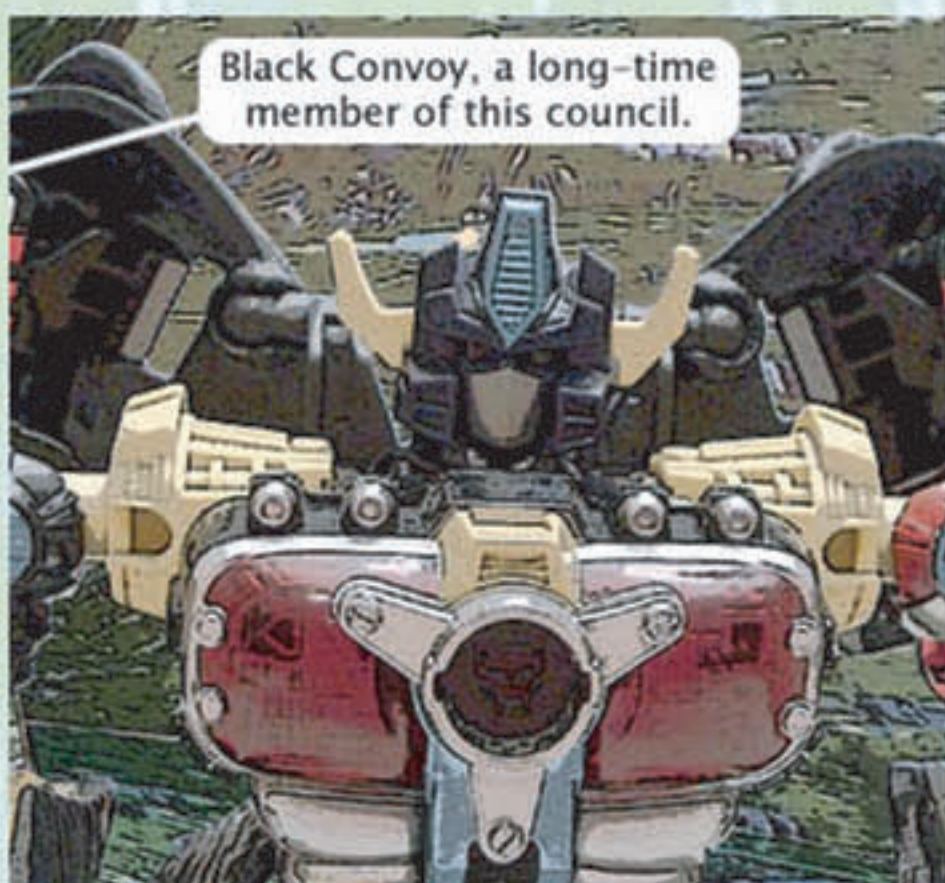


Leo Prime. The old blowhard himself. One of the oldest Maximals if I recall, and titular head of the Council of Elders for years.

I'm guessing that our freedom will turn out to be short-lived. I don't expect much sympathy from Prime. Or the rest.



We're all here now with the exception of Snarl and Skydive. Enough for a quorum. Generals, you remember my fellow councillors of course.



Black Convoy, a long-time member of this council.



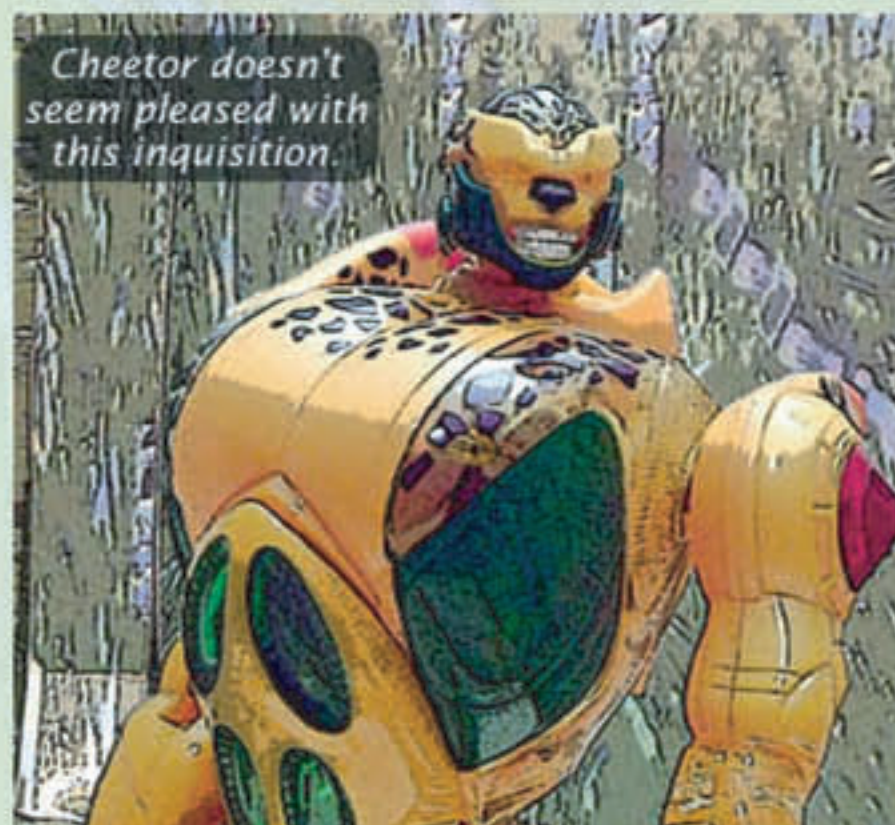
And of course, Cheetor you know very well.

Sorry about this.



It's no more than we expected.

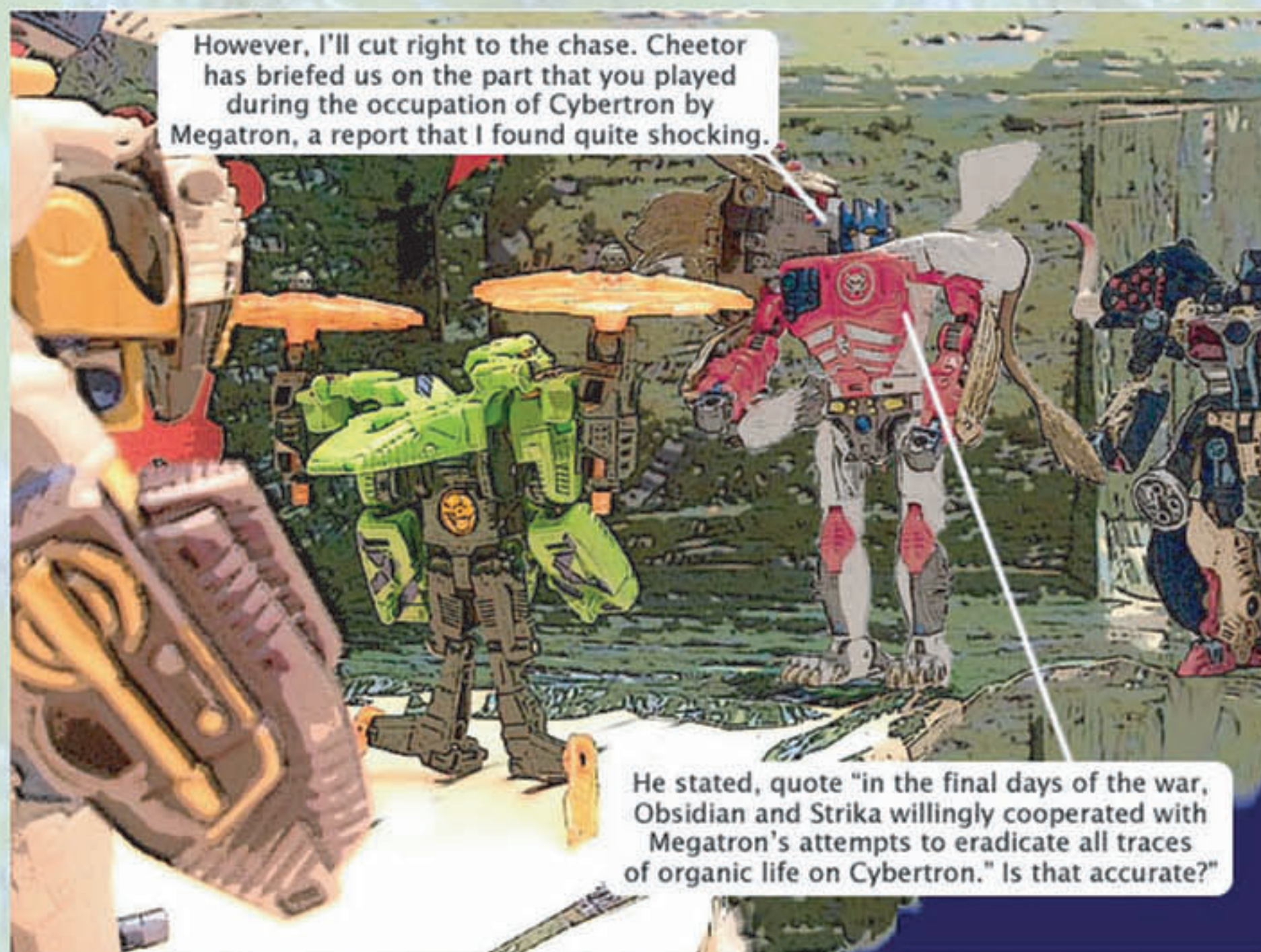




Cheetor doesn't seem pleased with this inquisition.

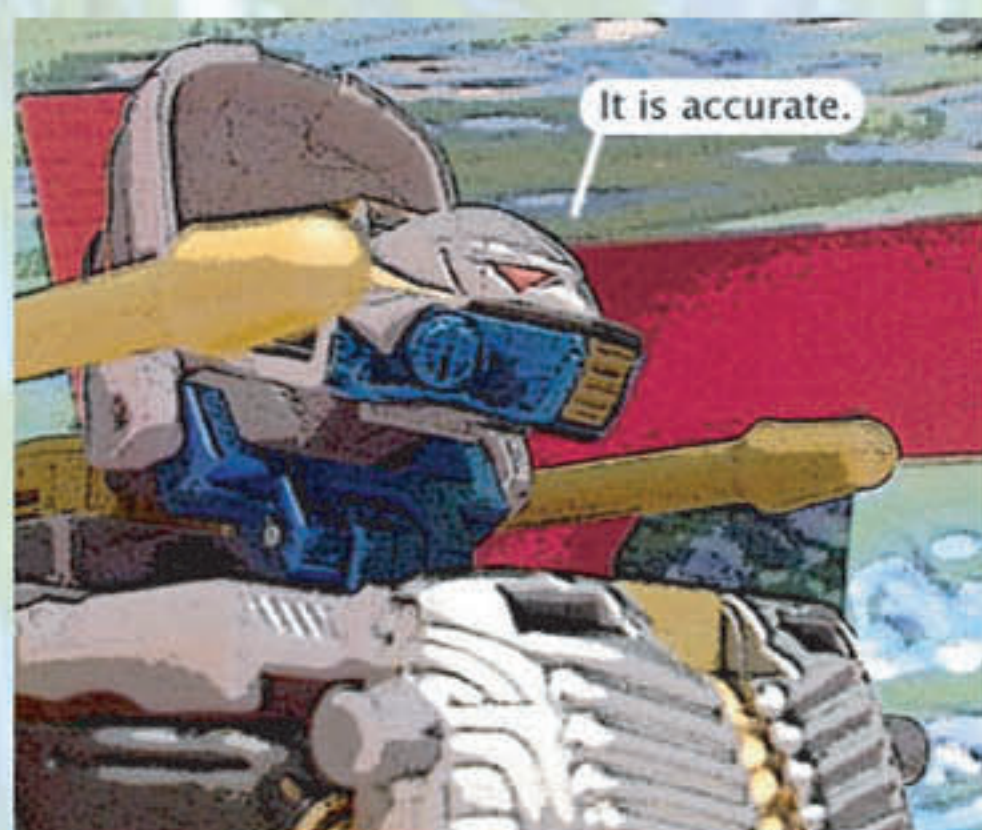


Generals, we're all familiar with your unimpeachable record of military success on behalf of all of Cybertron.

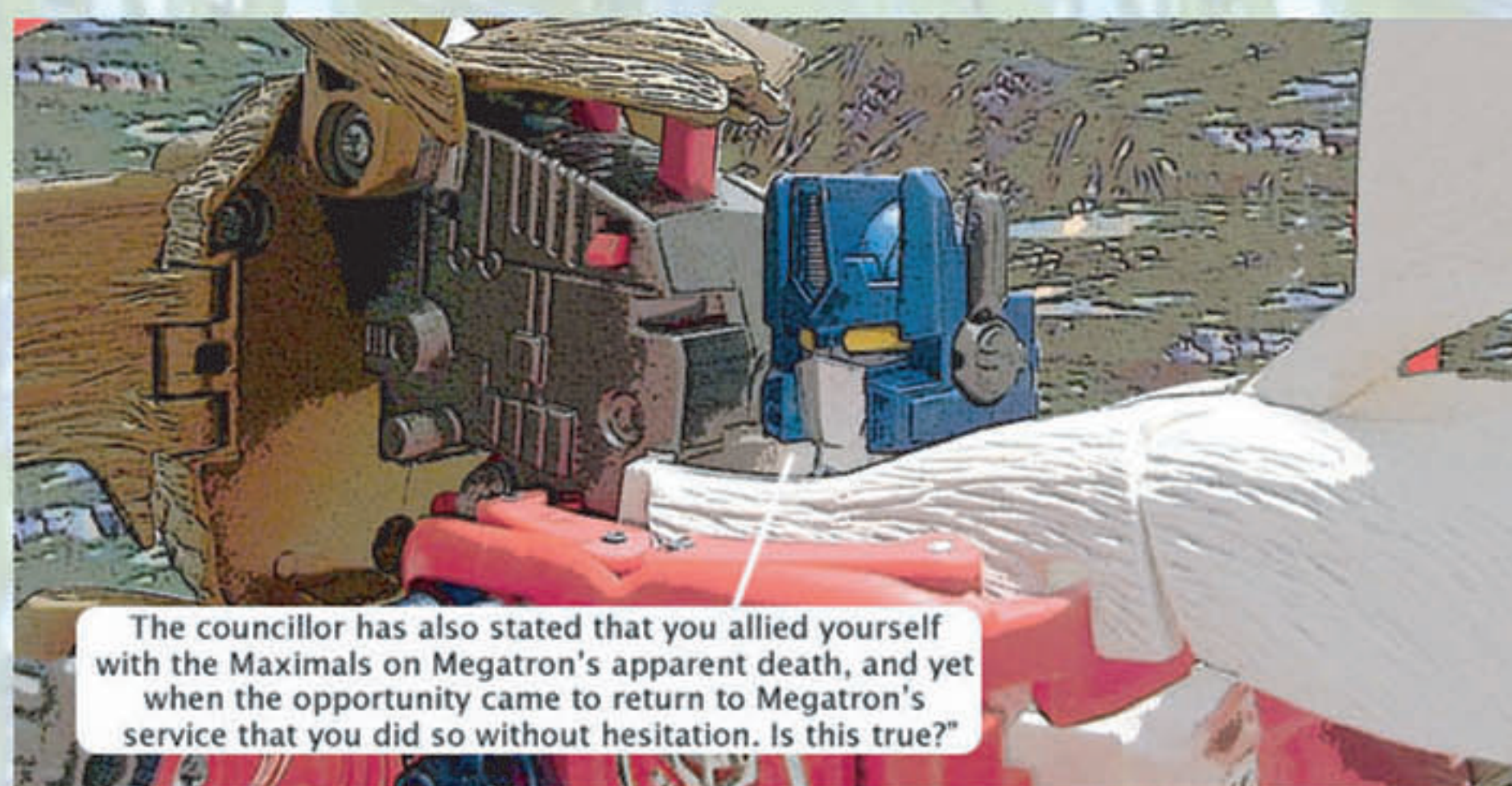


However, I'll cut right to the chase. Cheetor has briefed us on the part that you played during the occupation of Cybertron by Megatron, a report that I found quite shocking.

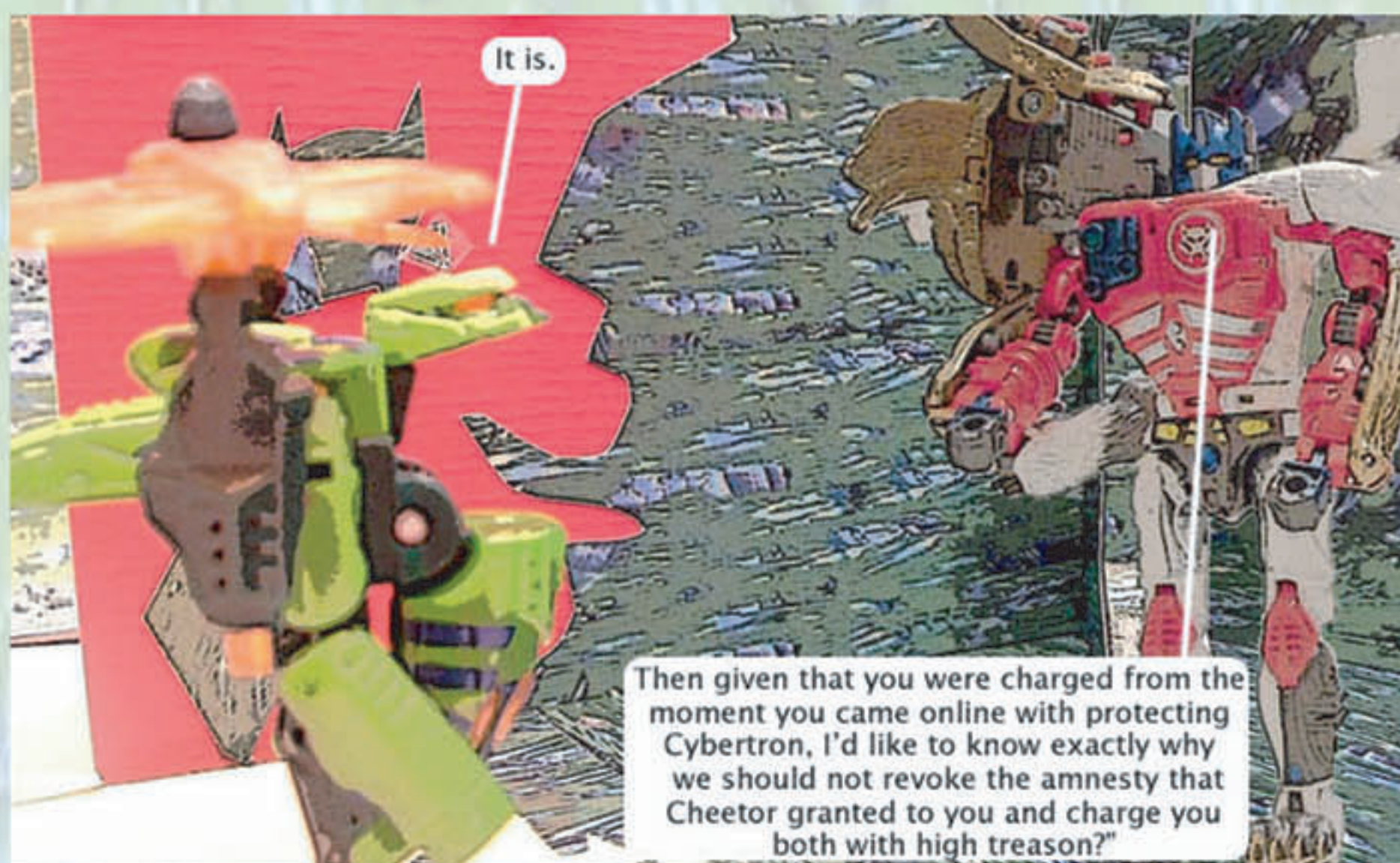
He stated, quote "in the final days of the war, Obsidian and Strika willingly cooperated with Megatron's attempts to eradicate all traces of organic life on Cybertron." Is that accurate?"



It is accurate.



The councillor has also stated that you allied yourself with the Maximals on Megatron's apparent death, and yet when the opportunity came to return to Megatron's service that you did so without hesitation. Is this true?"



It is.

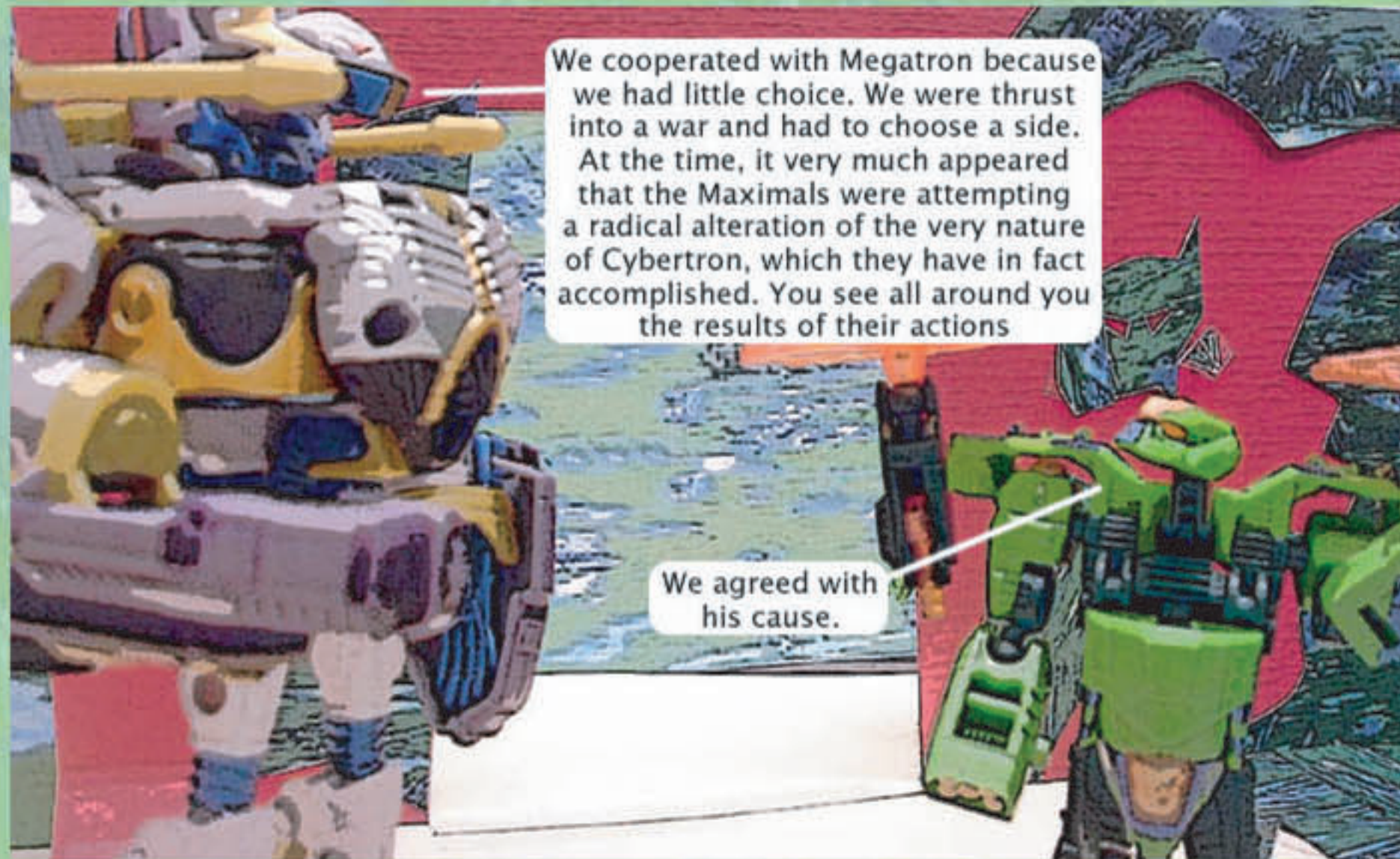
Then given that you were charged from the moment you came online with protecting Cybertron, I'd like to know exactly why we should not revoke the amnesty that Cheetor granted to you and charge you both with high treason?"





We have the greatest respect for your service.

Please justify your actions.



We cooperated with Megatron because we had little choice. We were thrust into a war and had to choose a side. At the time, it very much appeared that the Maximals were attempting a radical alteration of the very nature of Cybertron, which they have in fact accomplished. You see all around you the results of their actions.

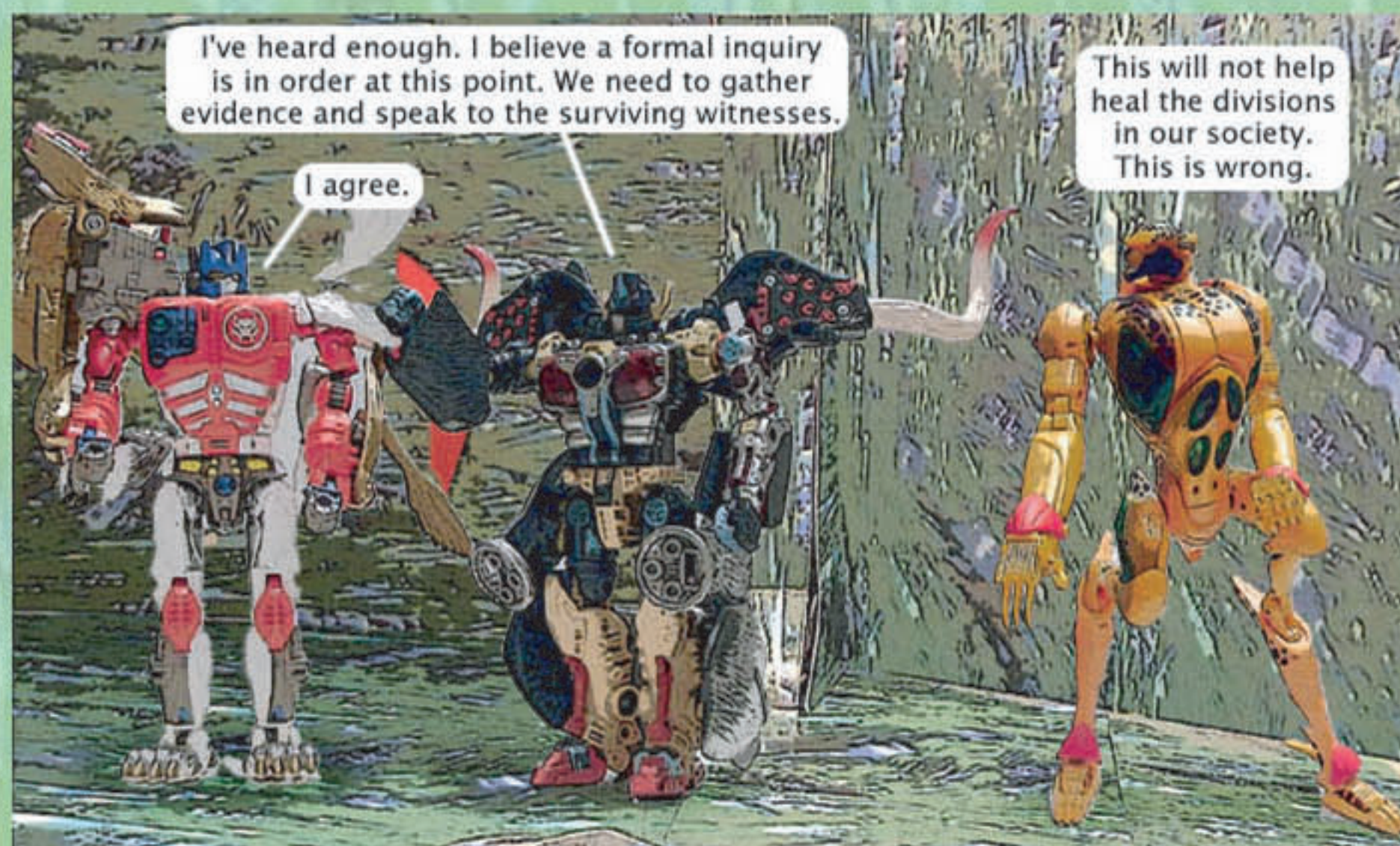
We agreed with his cause.



And yet you joined the Maximals.

I did believe in his cause. As Thrust said, you have to pick a side and remain loyal. I made my choice.

For a time, we were allied against a common threat.

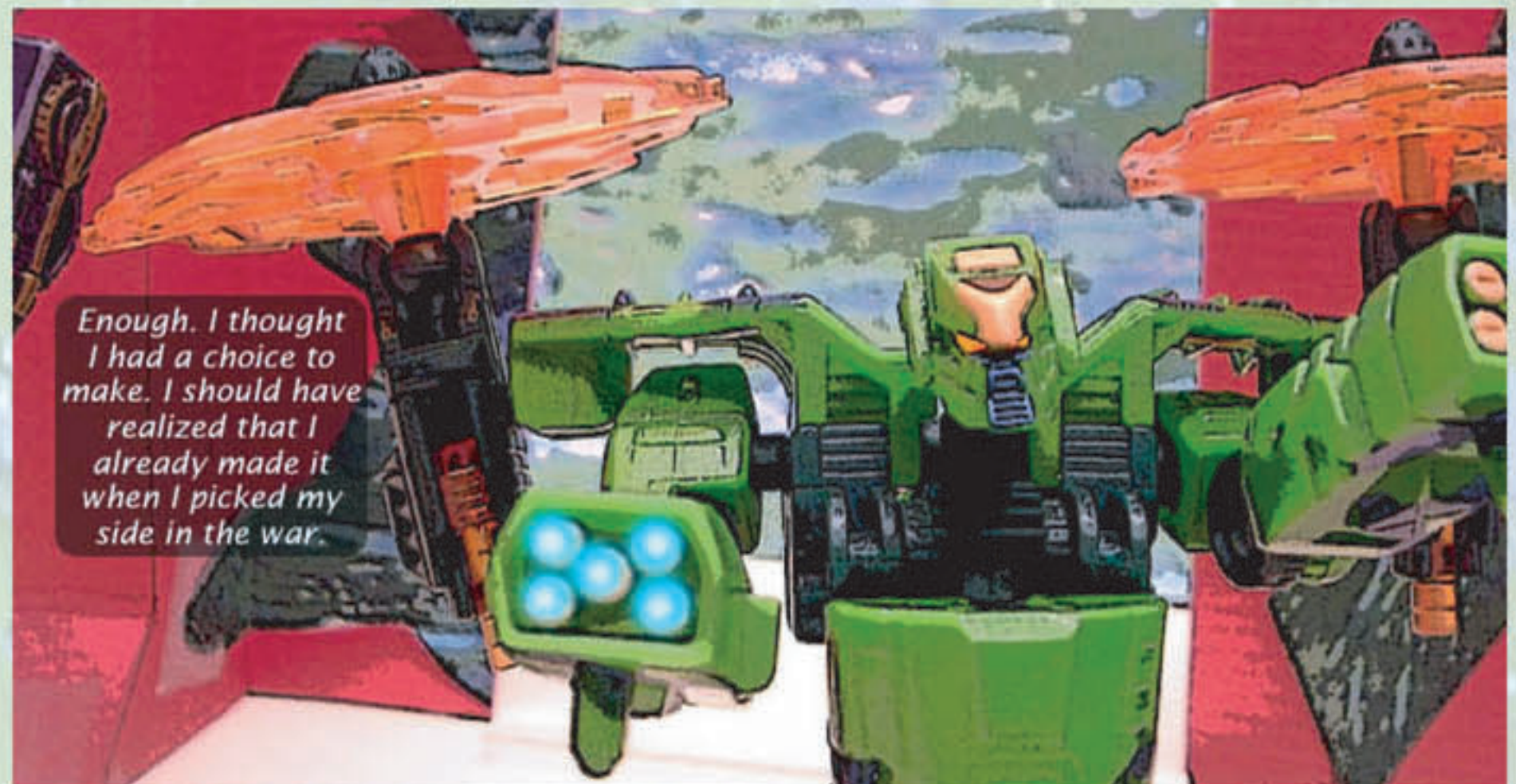
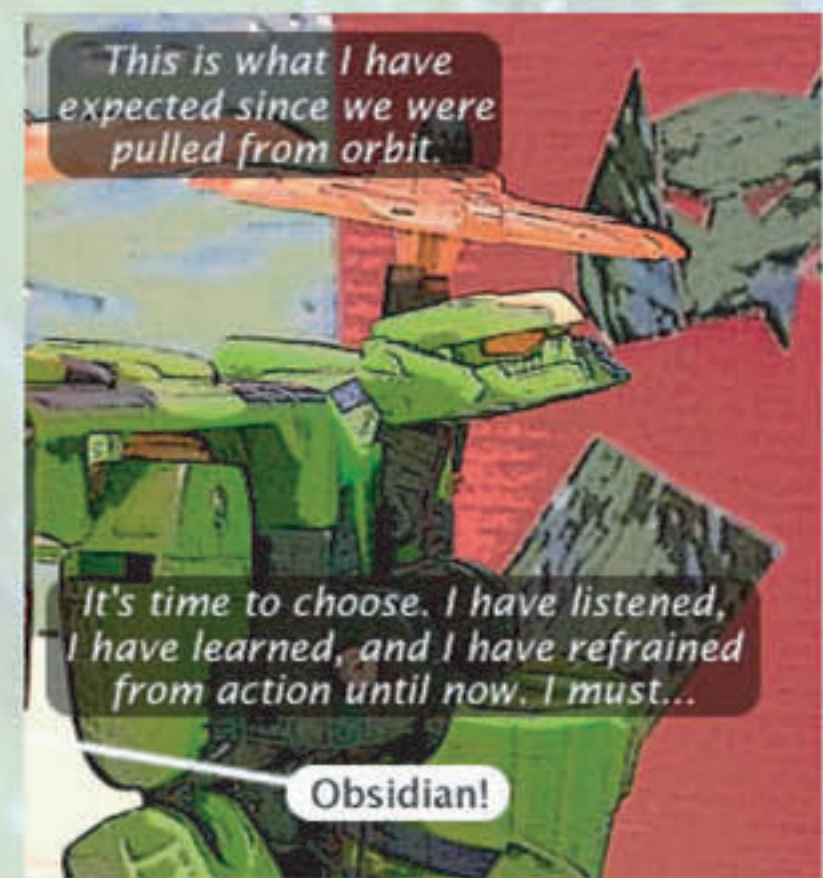
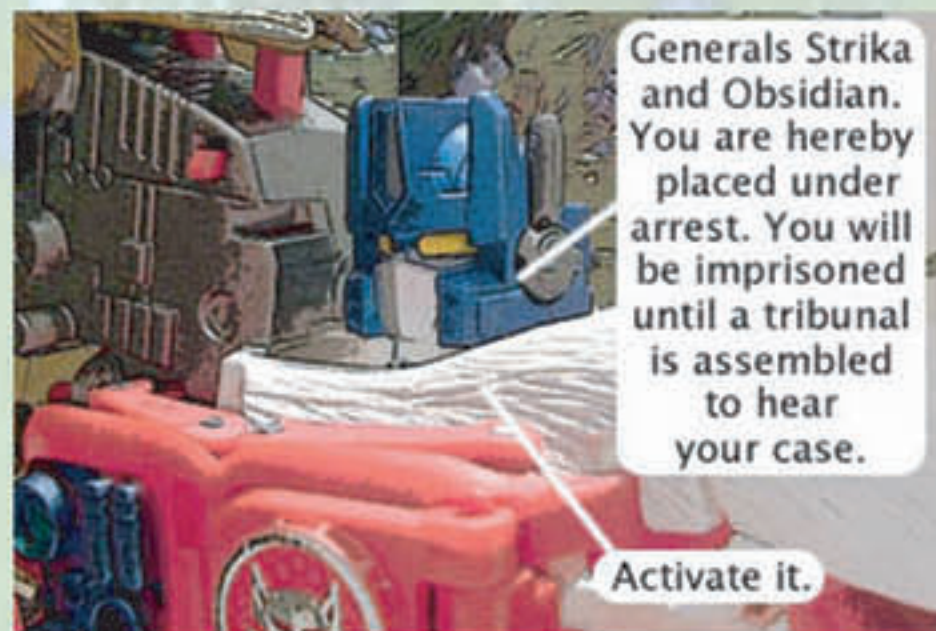


I've heard enough. I believe a formal inquiry is in order at this point. We need to gather evidence and speak to the surviving witnesses.

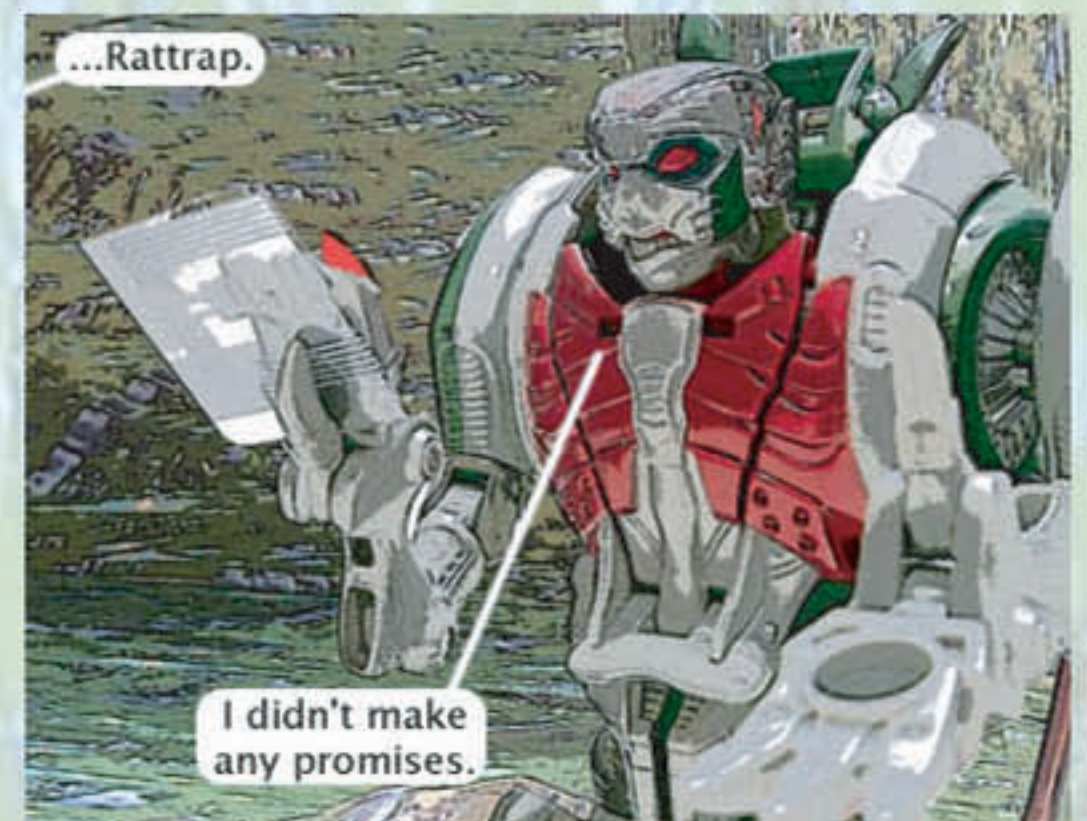
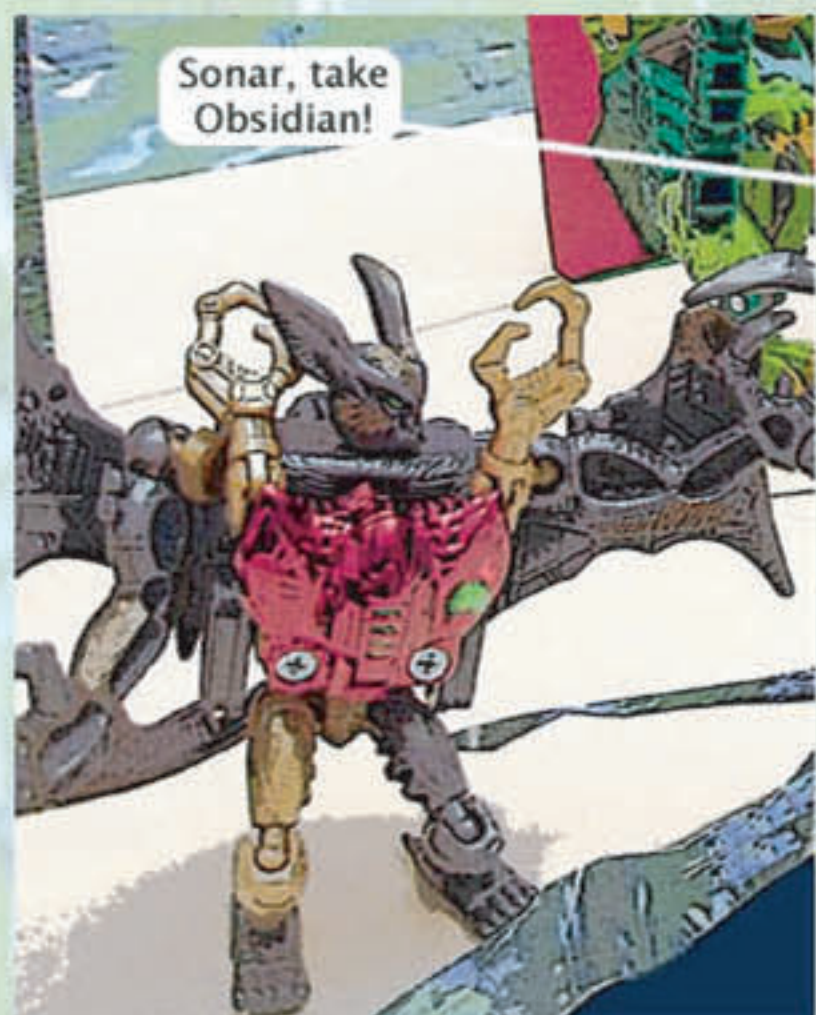
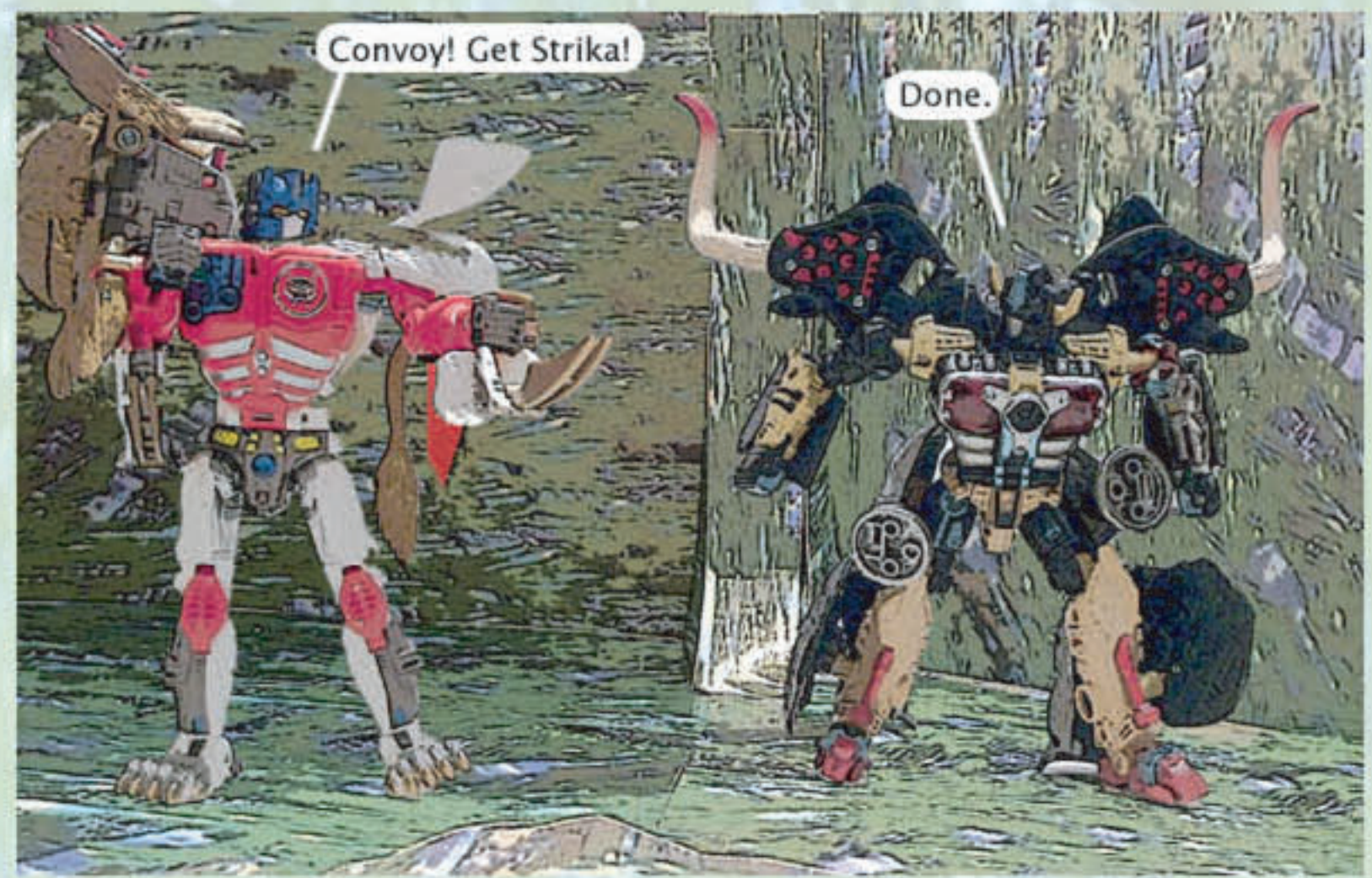
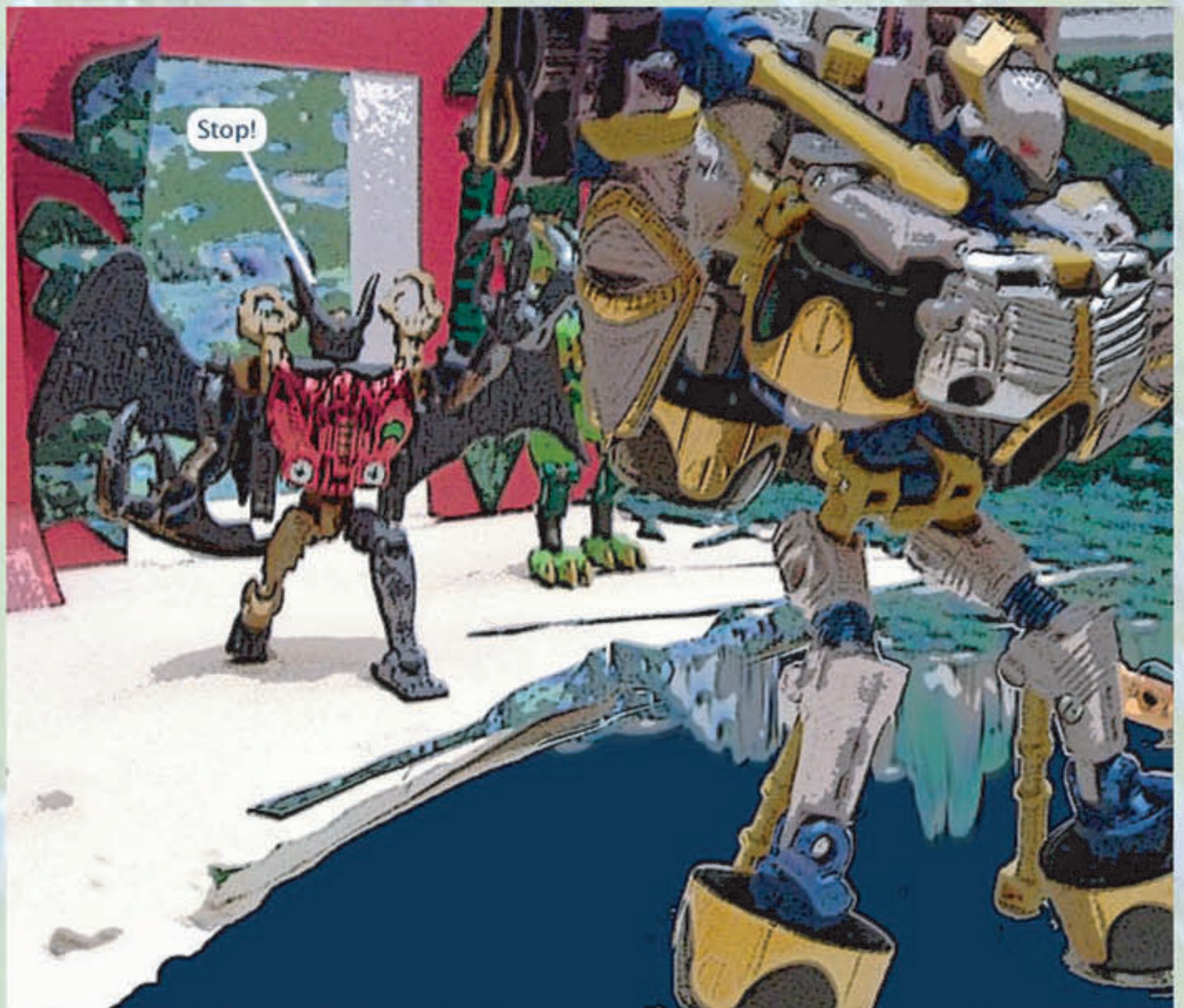
I agree.

This will not help heal the divisions in our society. This is wrong.

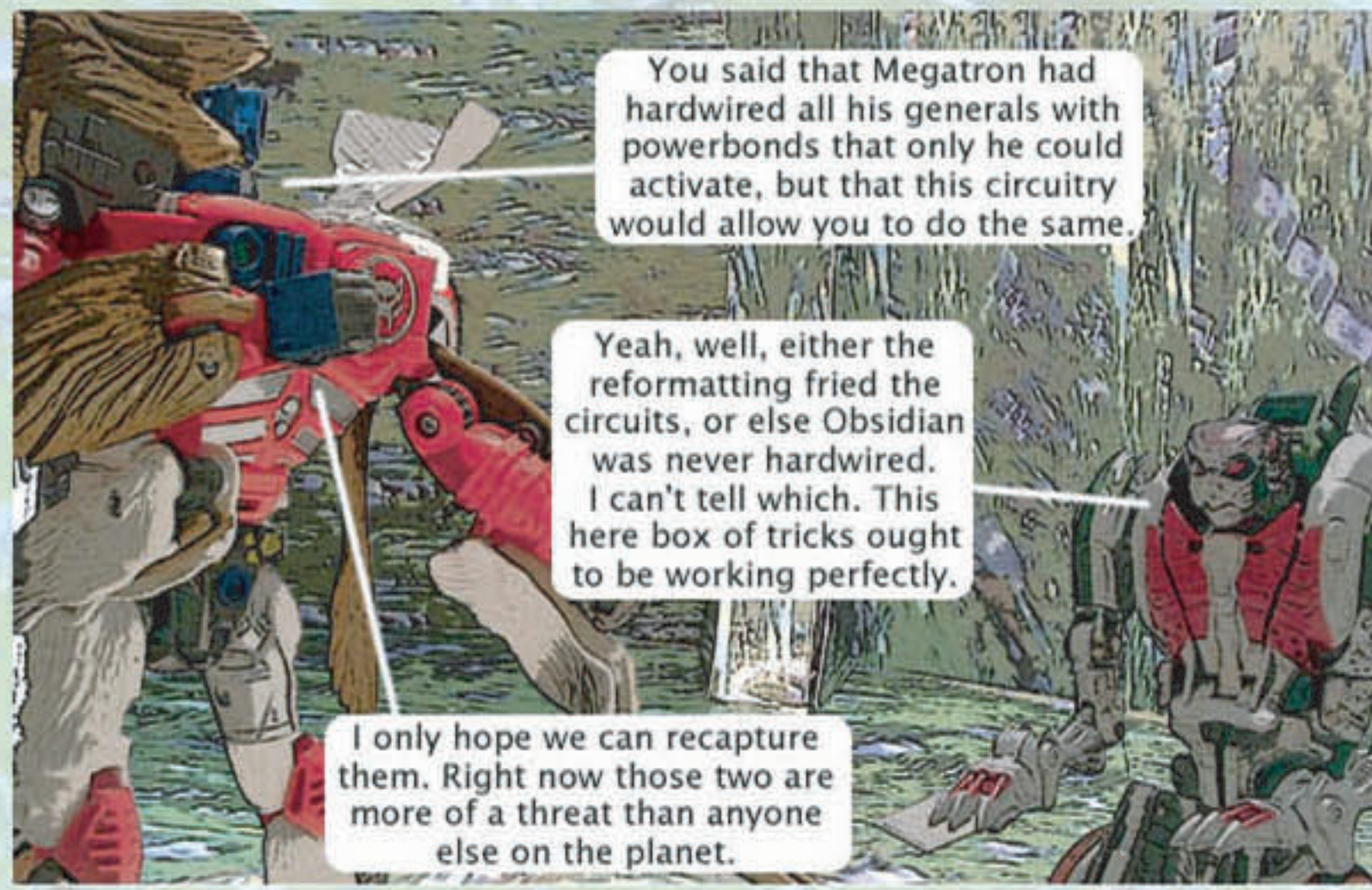












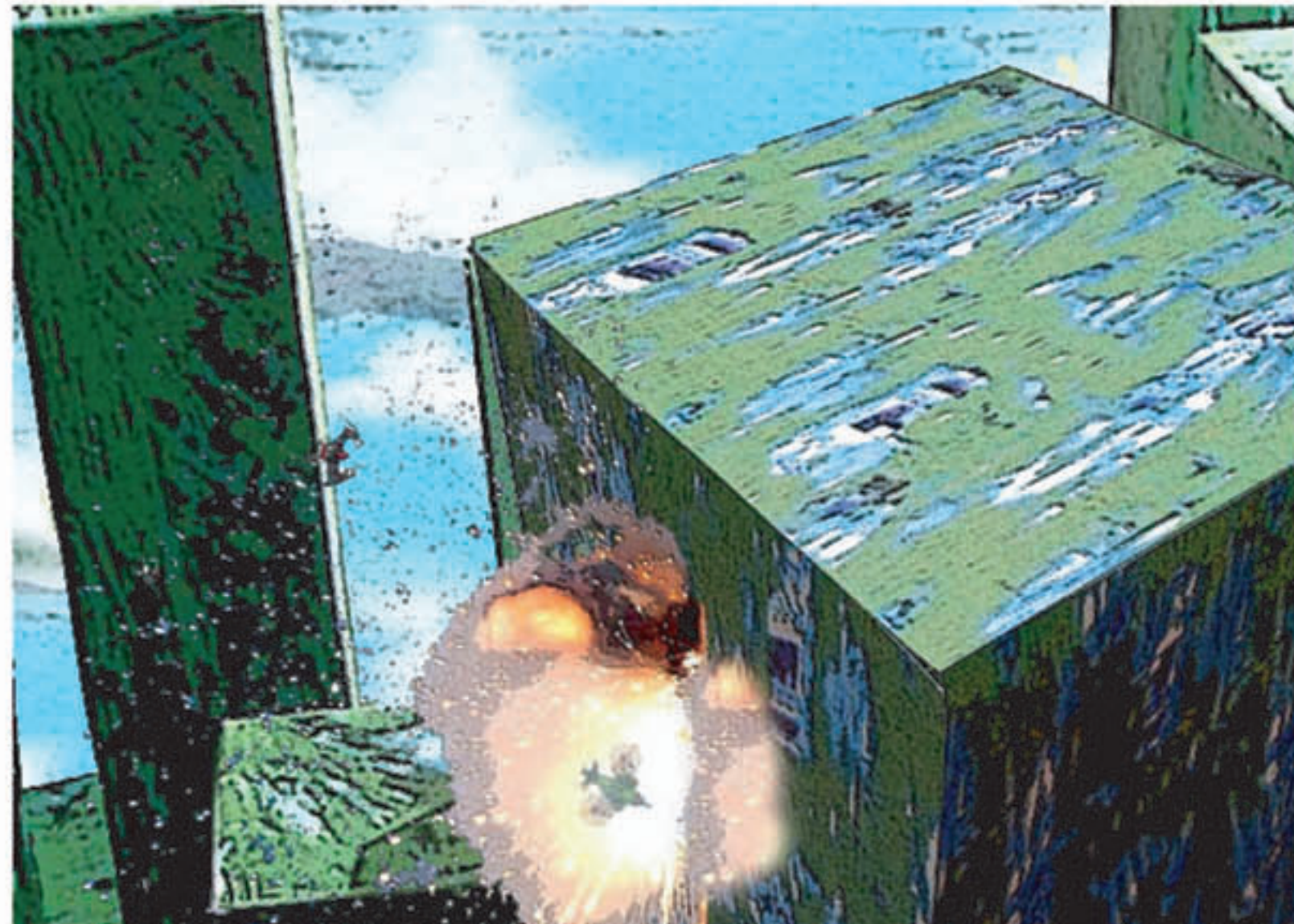
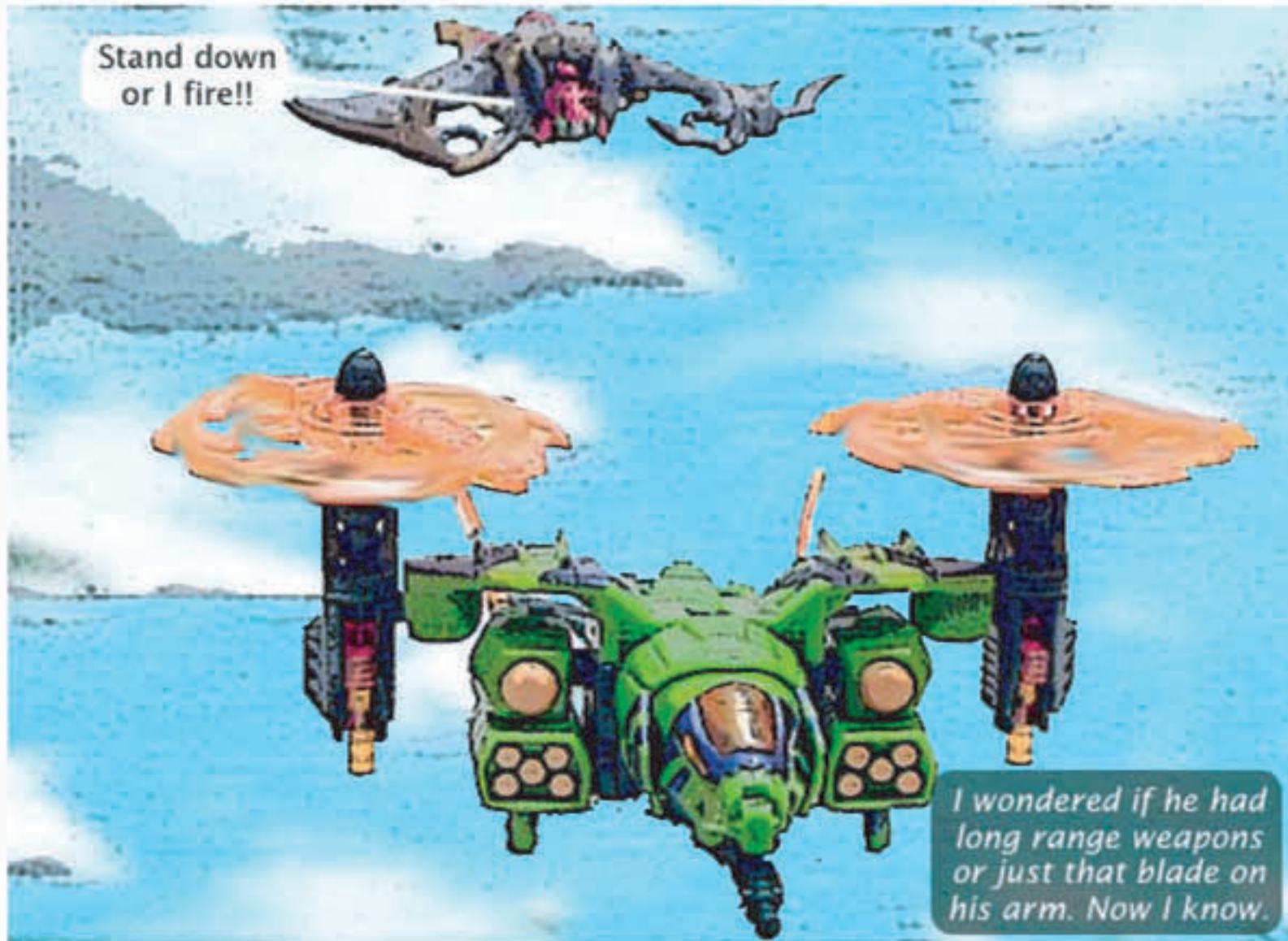
You said that Megatron had hardwired all his generals with powerbonds that only he could activate, but that this circuitry would allow you to do the same.

Yeah, well, either the reformatting fried the circuits, or else Obsidian was never hardwired. I can't tell which. This here box of tricks ought to be working perfectly.

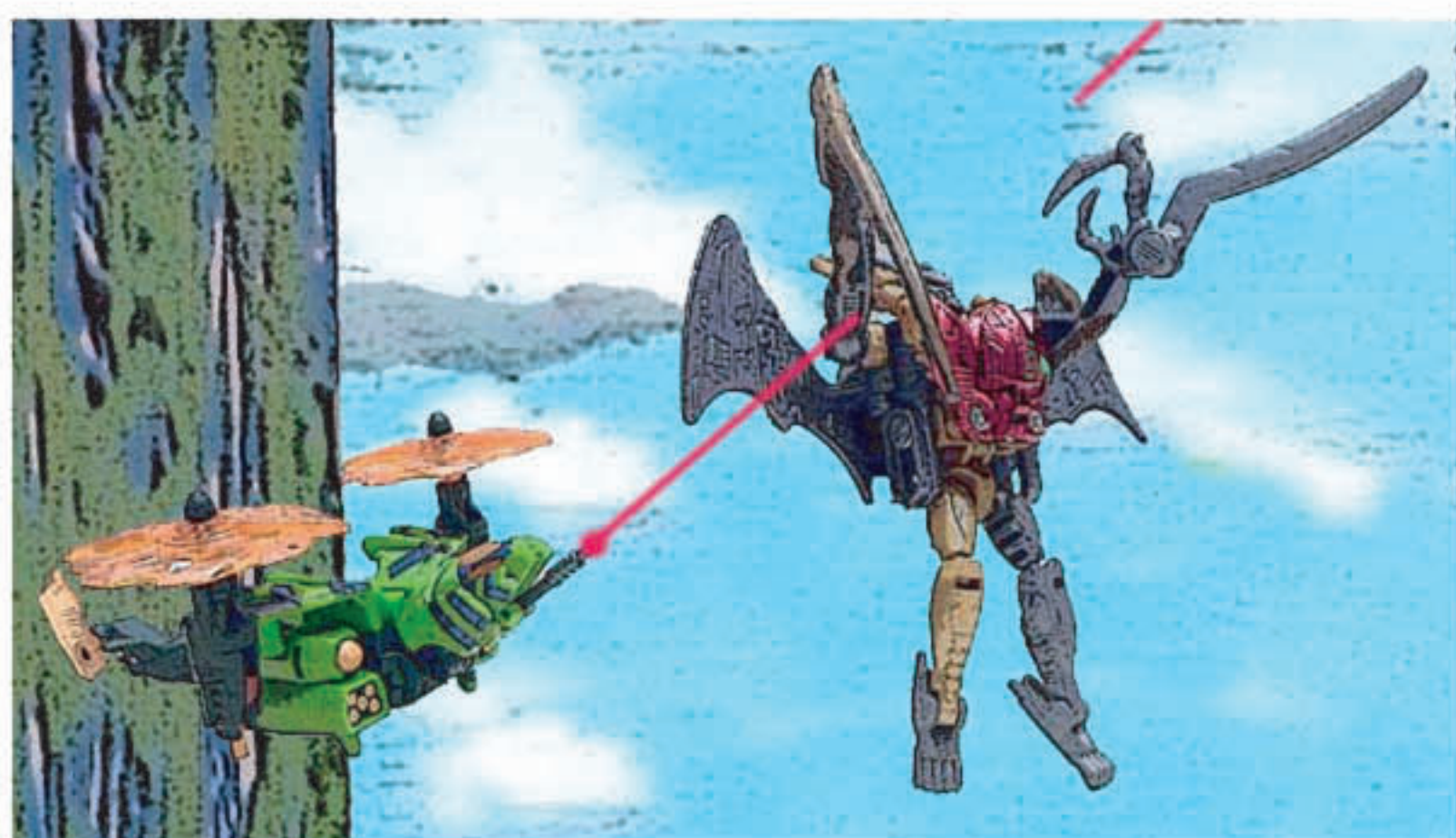
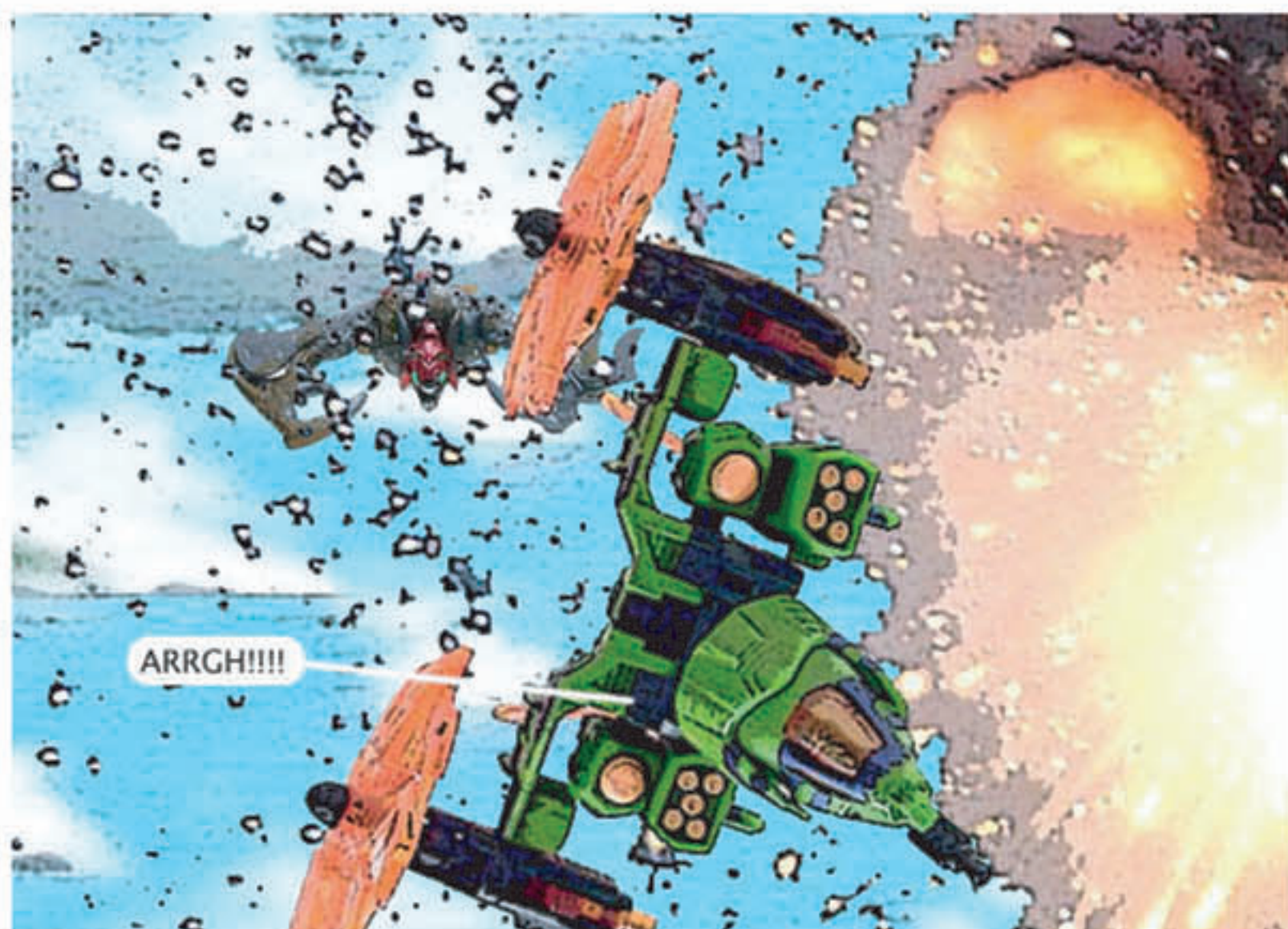
I only hope we can recapture them. Right now those two are more of a threat than anyone else on the planet.



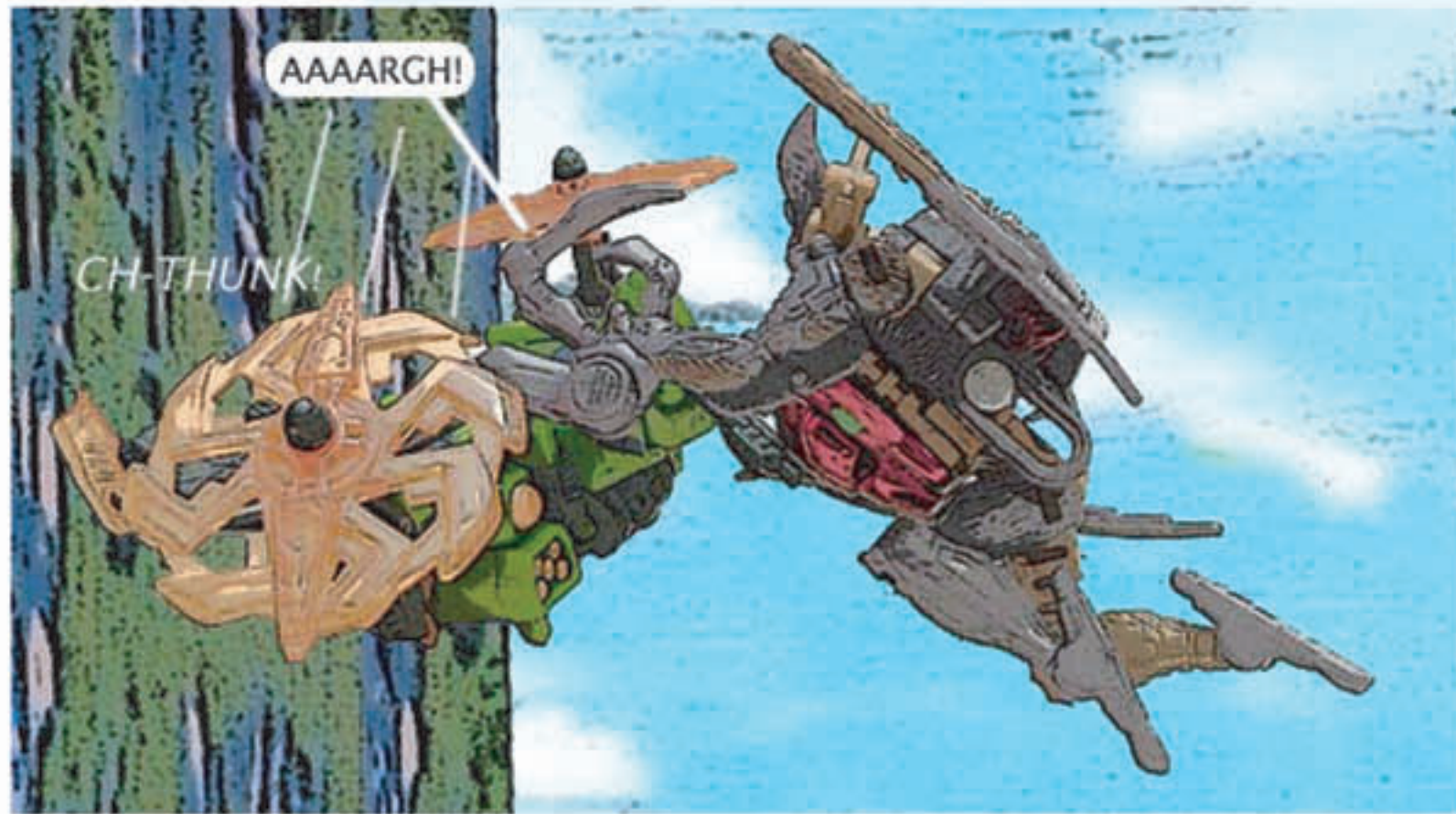
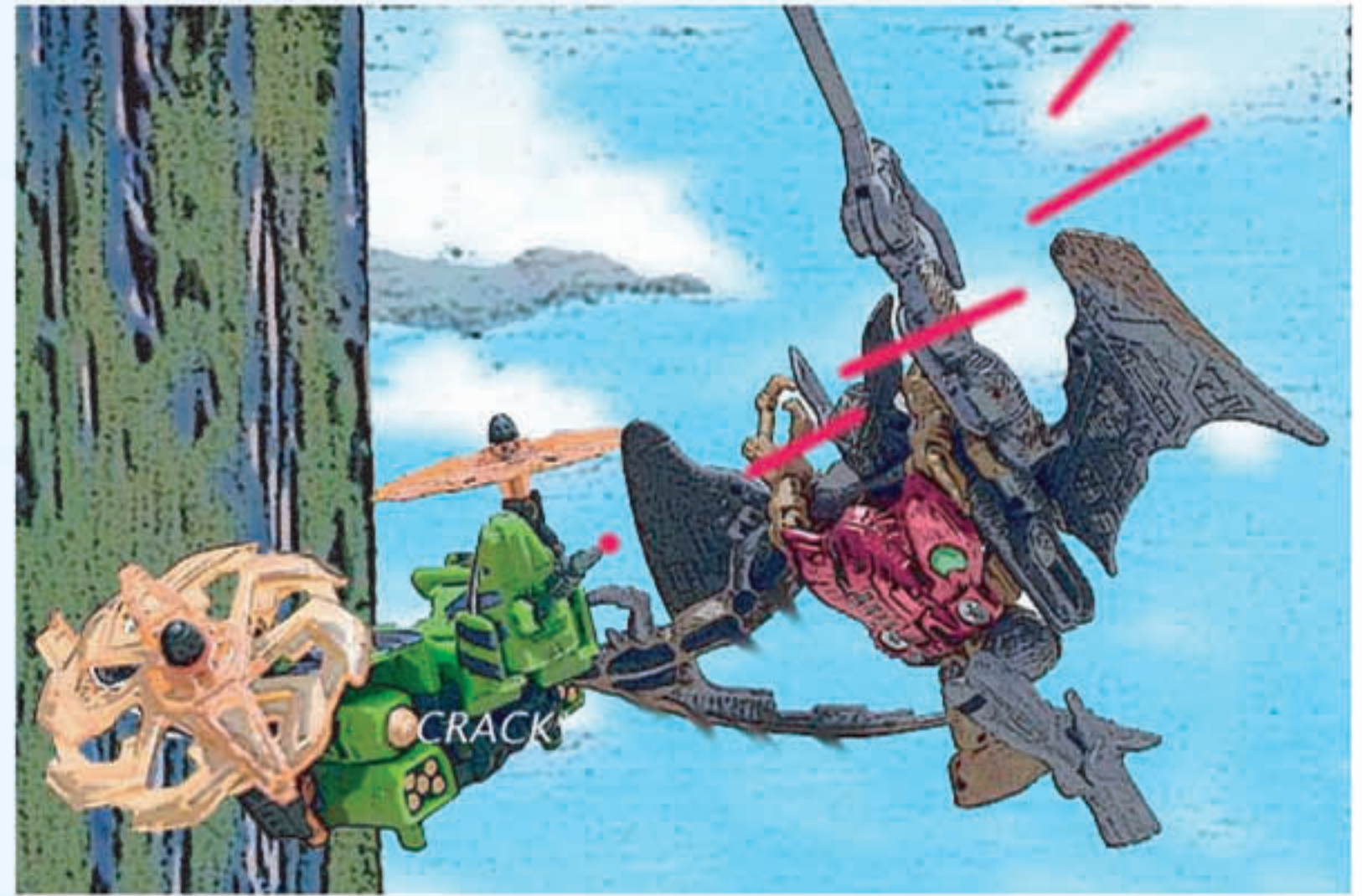
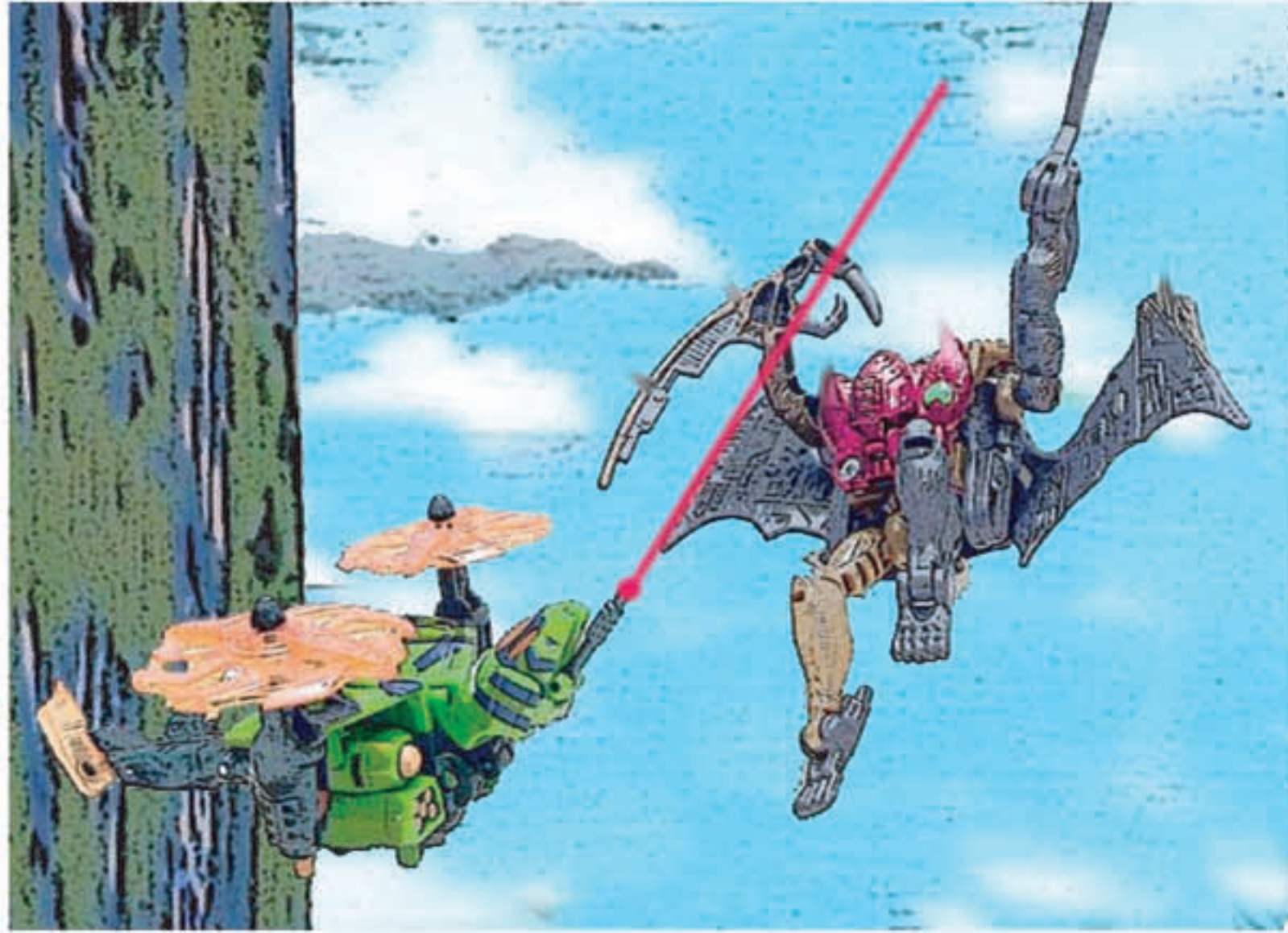
# PURSUIT















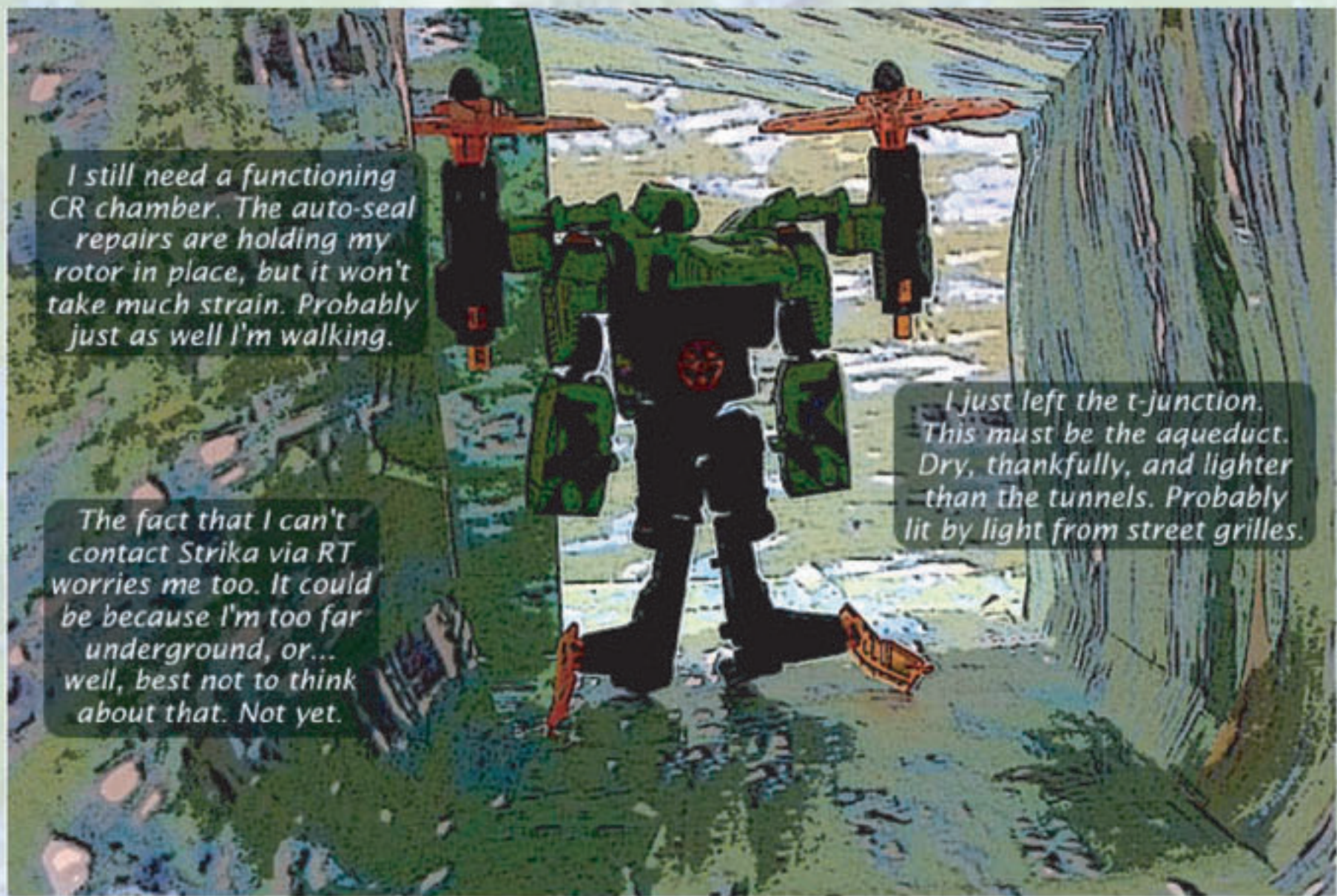




Soon:



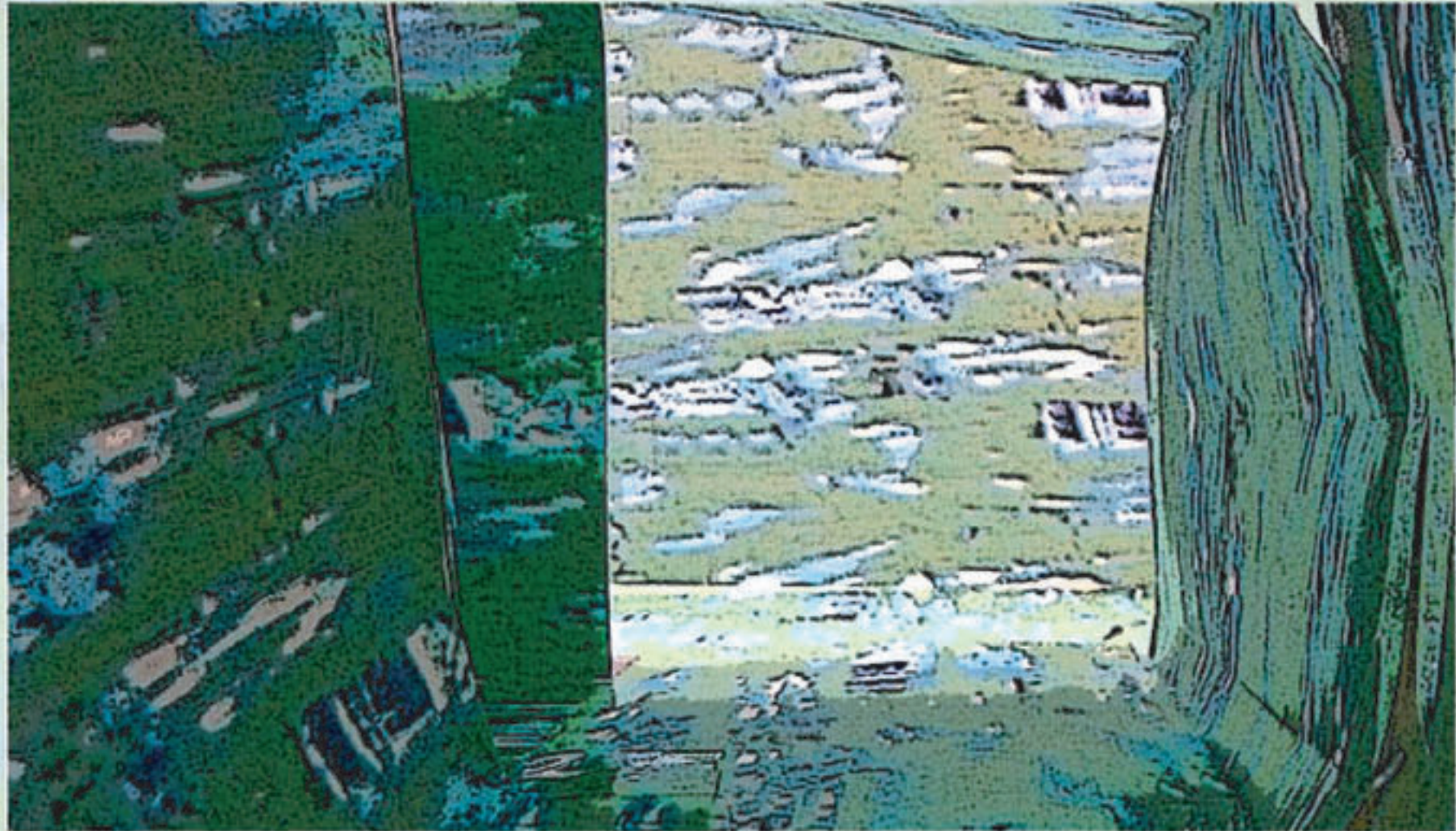




I still need a functioning CR chamber. The auto-seal repairs are holding my rotor in place, but it won't take much strain. Probably just as well I'm walking.

The fact that I can't contact Strika via RT worries me too. It could be because I'm too far underground, or... well, best not to think about that. Not yet.

I just left the t-junction. This must be the aqueduct. Dry, thankfully, and lighter than the tunnels. Probably lit by light from street grilles.



Maybe I'll find what I need at the city's cooling plant. I hope so.











Can't play around with this one.



No good. That weapon absorbs the energy.

He even has the same material covering his hands! I can't shoot the weapon from them.



Time for plan B. It'll probably kill both of us.

They're meant to be fired from a safe distance, not at point-blank range.

Disappointing. That all you have?



No.



I don't even want to know how much damage I took that time. Too much.

I dialed the blast yield as low as I could, but I still took major damage from the explosion.



Though not as much as he did.

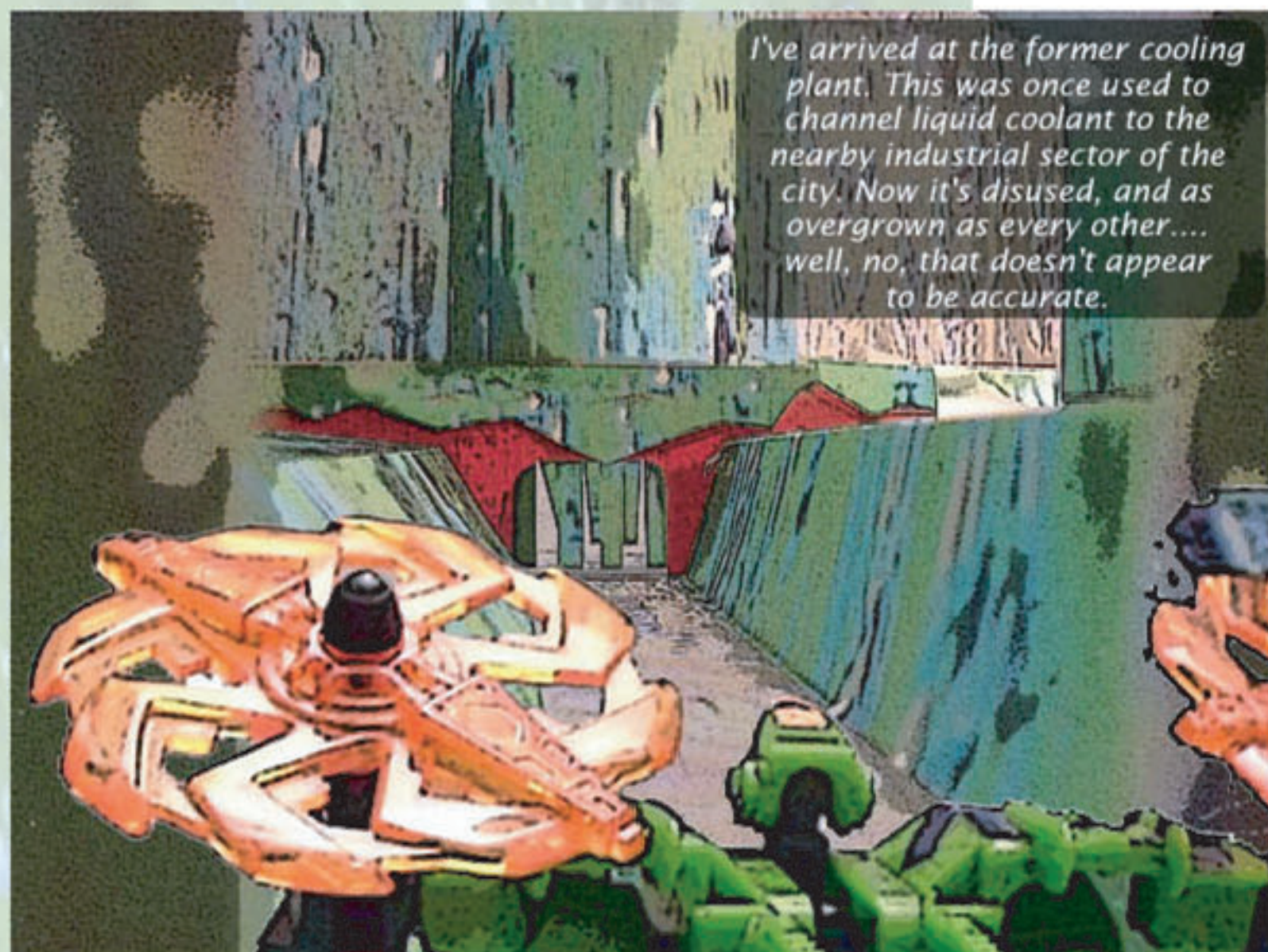


I don't know if he's alive or not. I do know this much... I can't go back. Not any more.





Whether it's a trap or not, I have to go on to the cooling station, and hope that I don't run into any more trouble. I don't know how much more damage I can sustain.



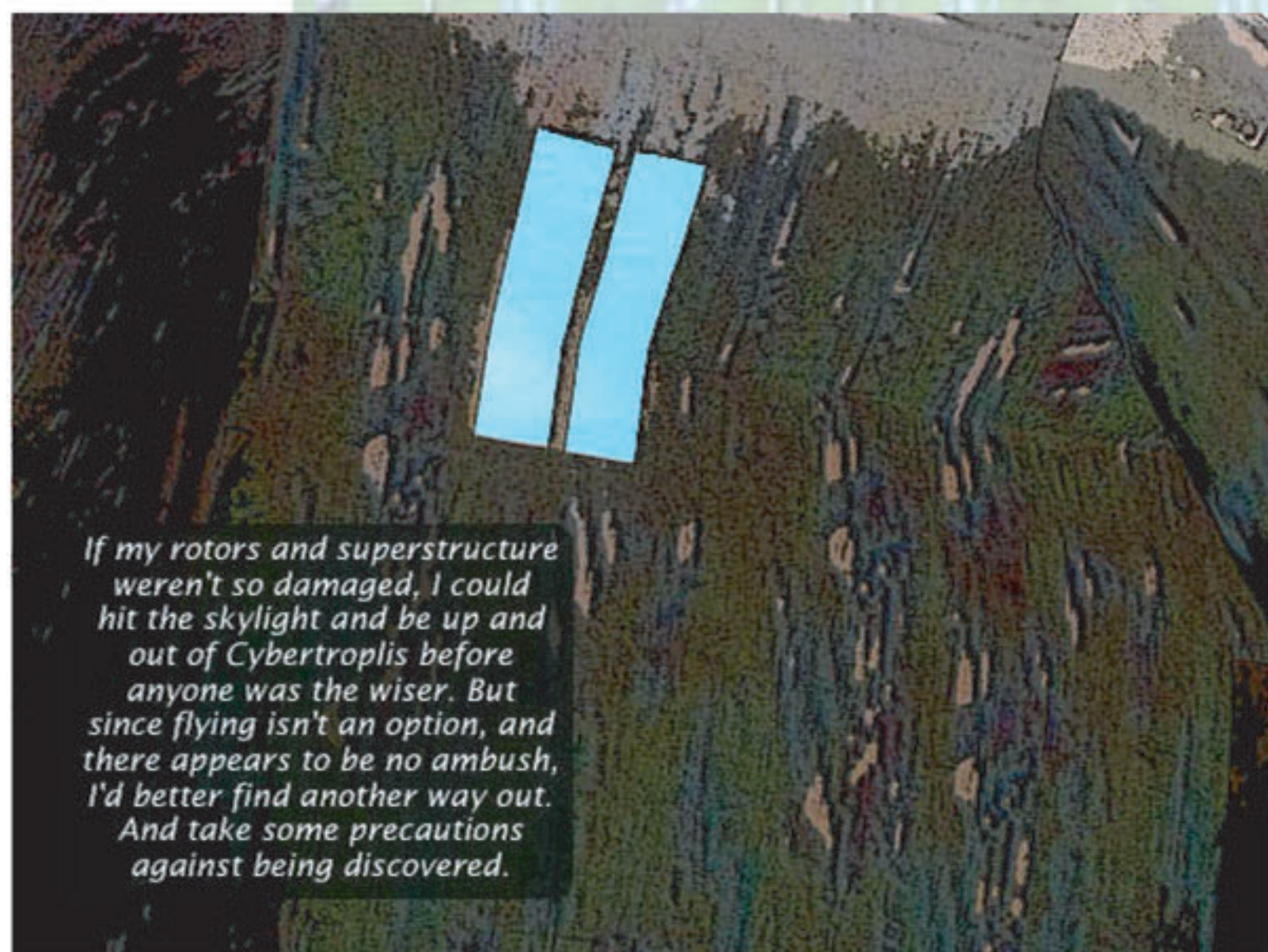
I've arrived at the former cooling plant. This was once used to channel liquid coolant to the nearby industrial sector of the city. Now it's disused, and as overgrown as every other.... well, no, that doesn't appear to be accurate.



This is the third structure I've seen, counting the Maximal ship and the council meeting room, that wasn't entirely covered with this organic growth. Part of the old structure is still visible.



That must be the observation port. The actual flow controls are probably somewhere else.



If my rotors and superstructure weren't so damaged, I could hit the skylight and be up and out of Cybertropolis before anyone was the wiser. But since flying isn't an option, and there appears to be no ambush, I'd better find another way out. And take some precautions against being discovered.

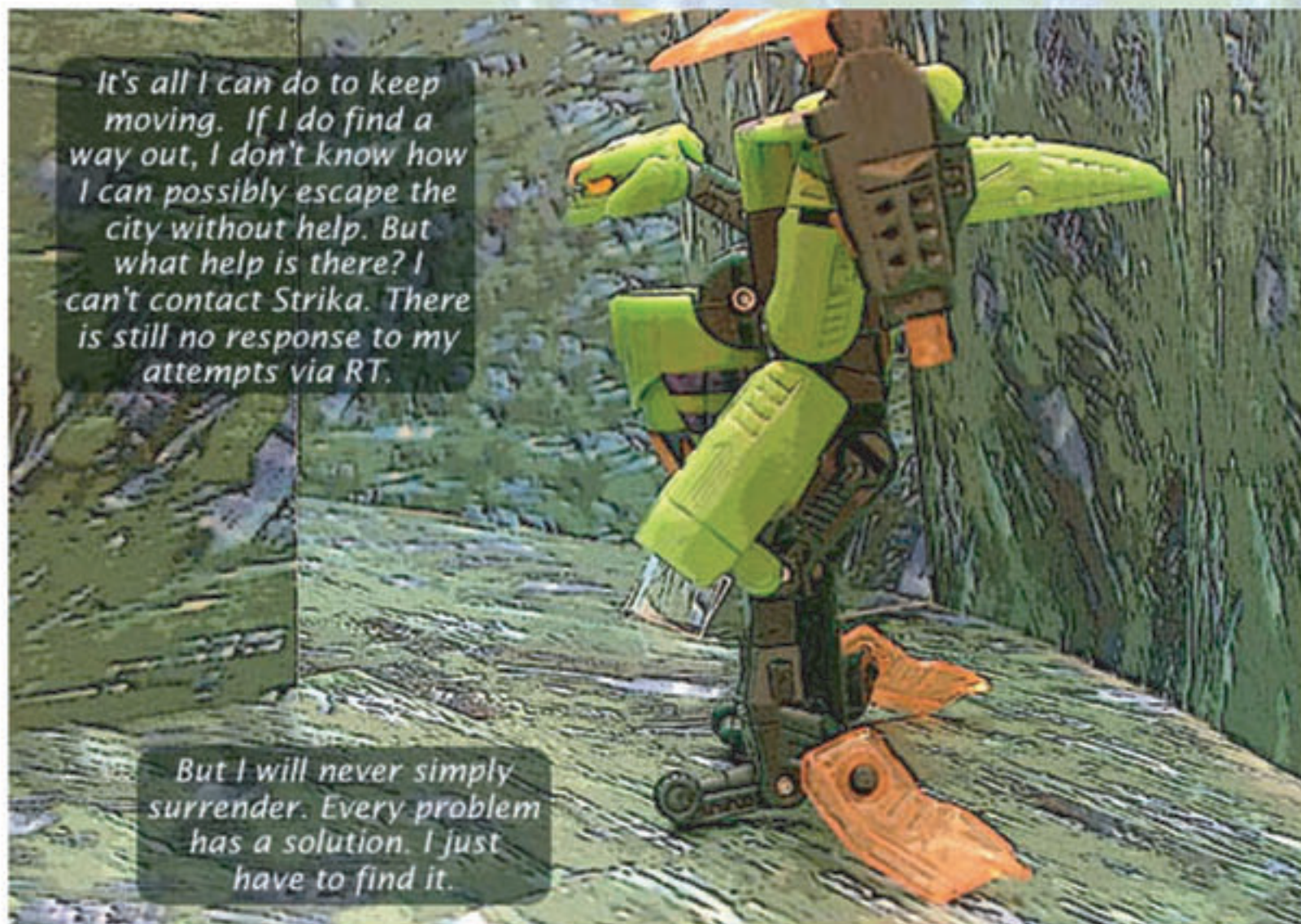


Time to head... right, I think. Office and control complex.



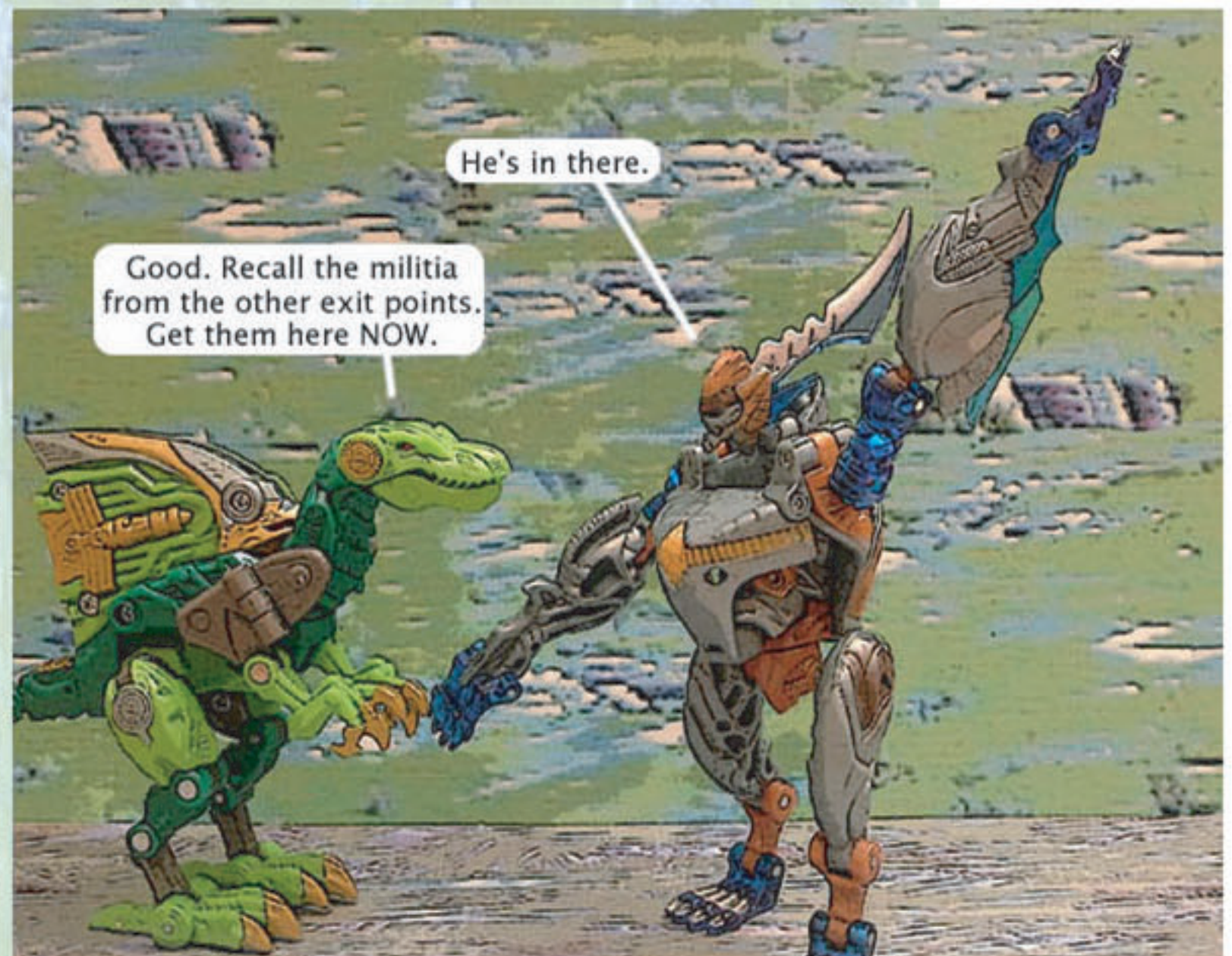


If nothing else, I won't feel quite so exposed when I'm out of this wide open room.



It's all I can do to keep moving. If I do find a way out, I don't know how I can possibly escape the city without help. But what help is there? I can't contact Strika. There is still no response to my attempts via RT.

But I will never simply surrender. Every problem has a solution. I just have to find it.



He's in there.

Good. Recall the militia from the other exit points. Get them here NOW.



Just keep moving...



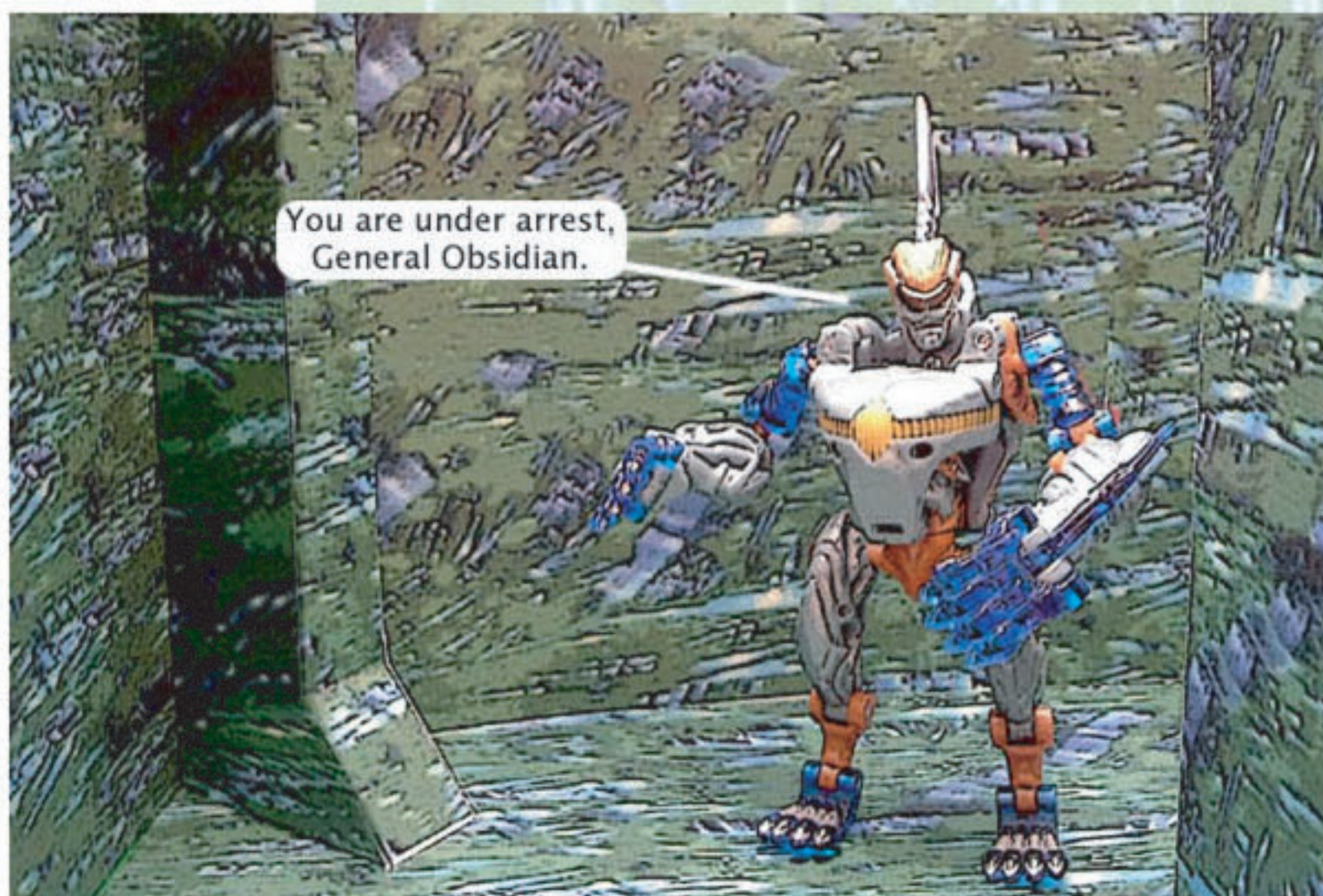
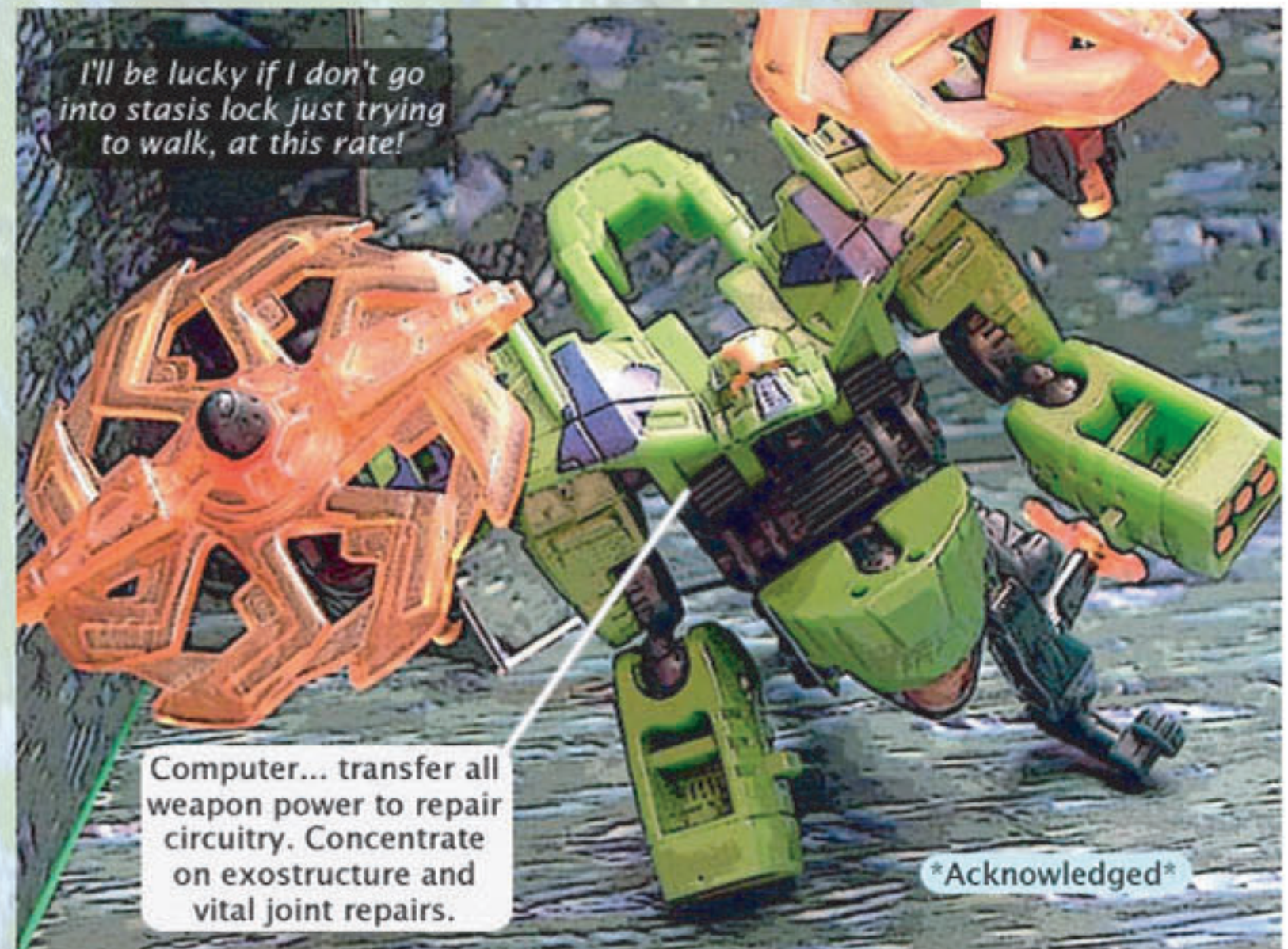
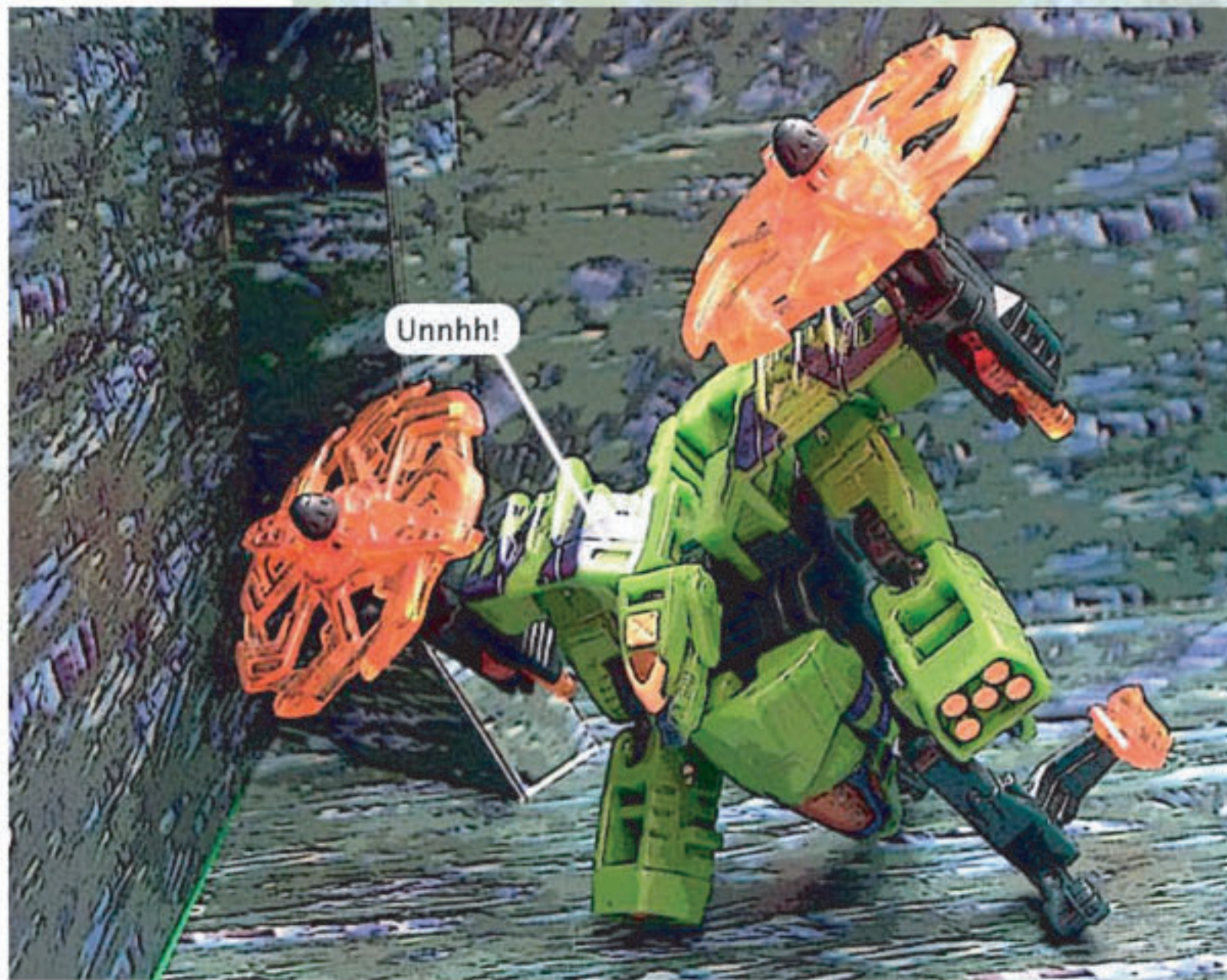
Sonar came back in bad shape. Do not underestimate Obsidian. Have the building surrounded.

Quickstrike, you and I will go in. Have Geckobot meet us inside.

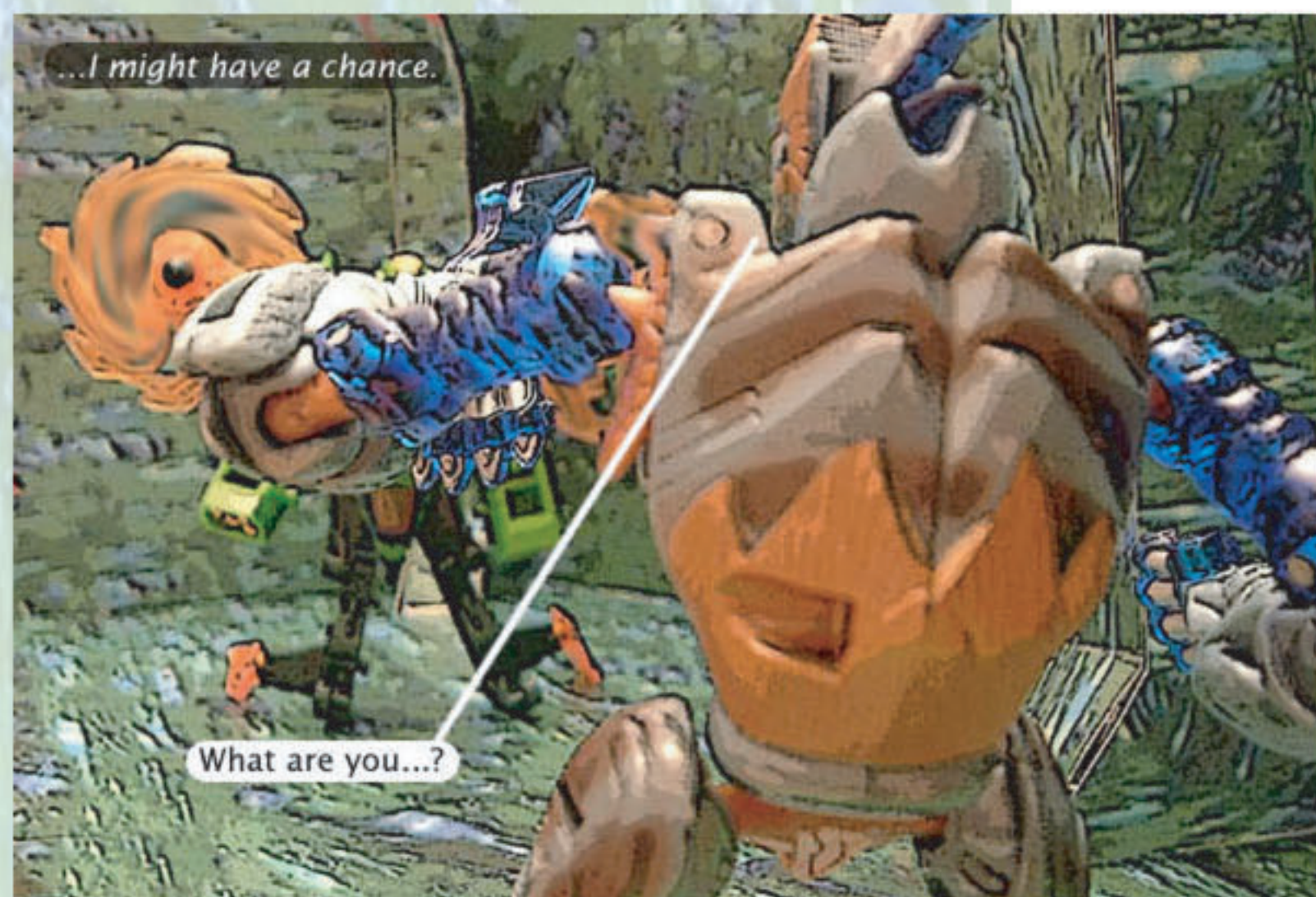


I think... there may be a transmitter down in the ... lower... control center. I can use my power core... to...

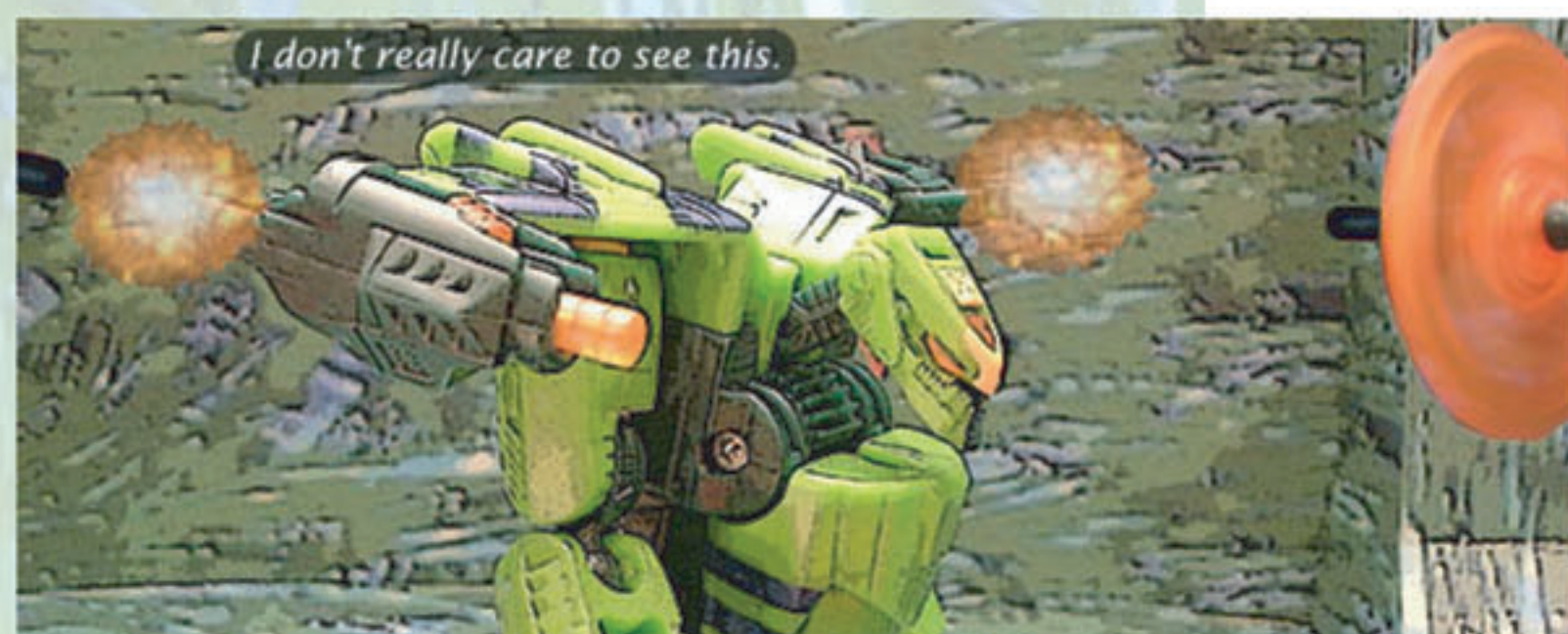




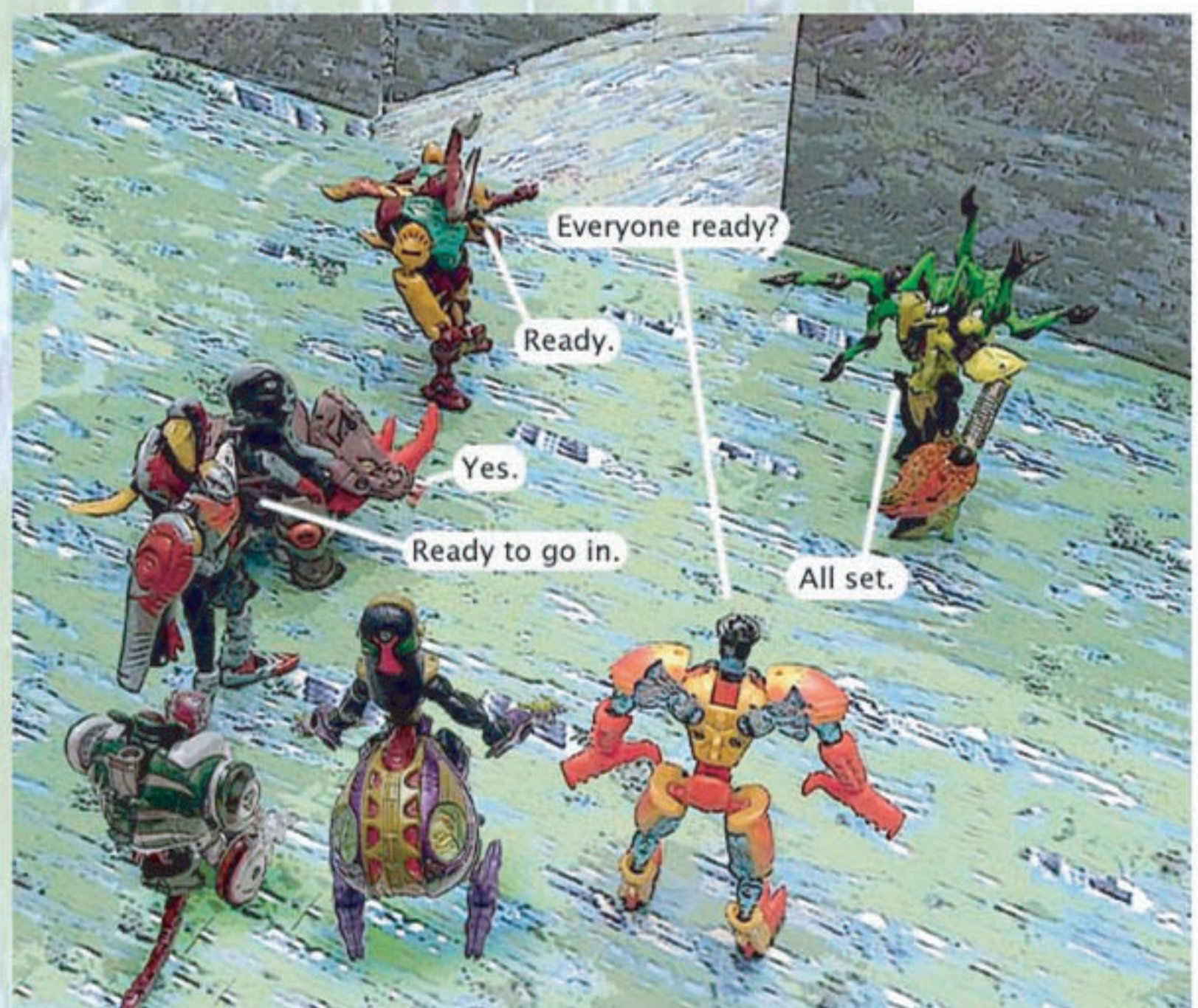
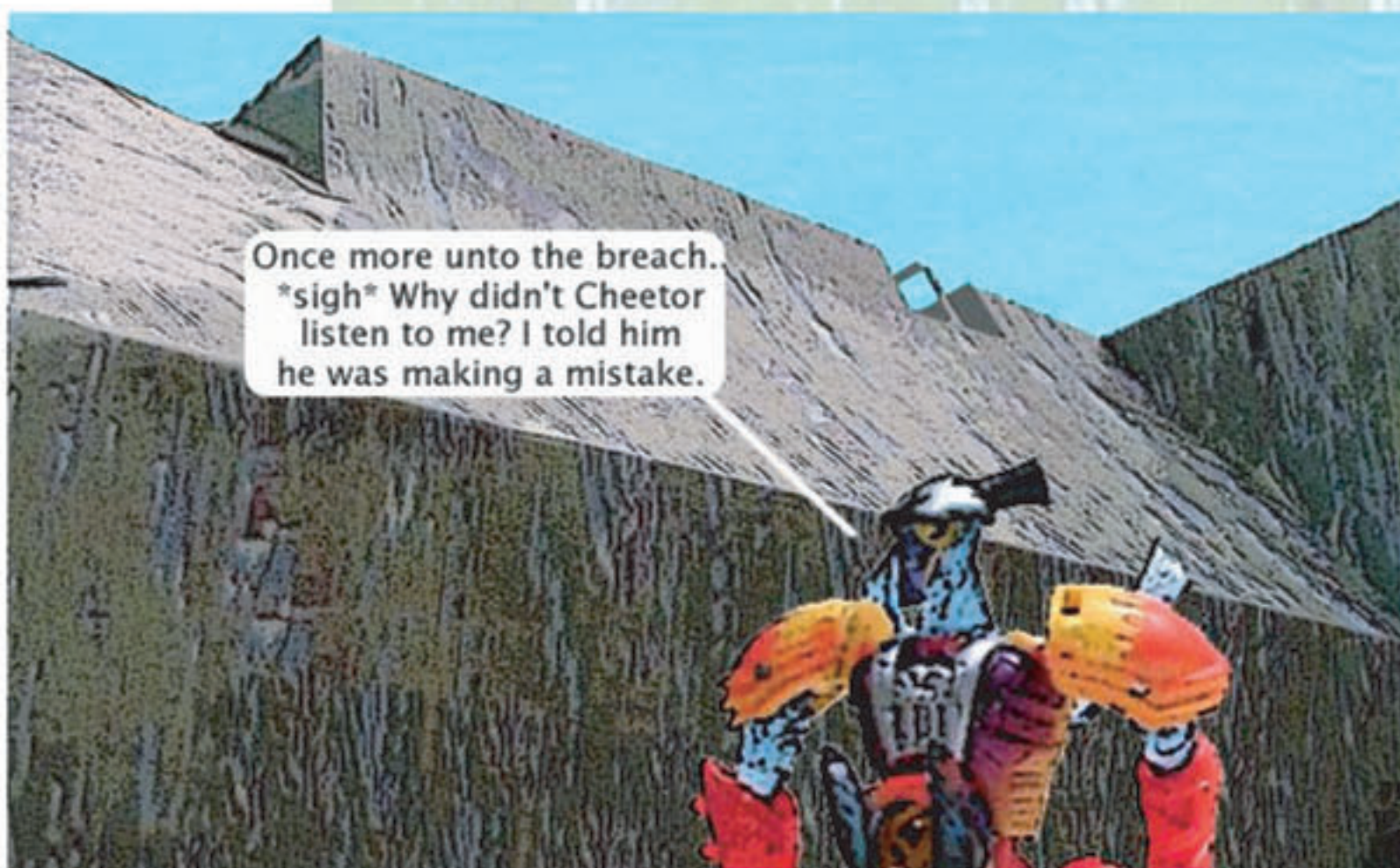
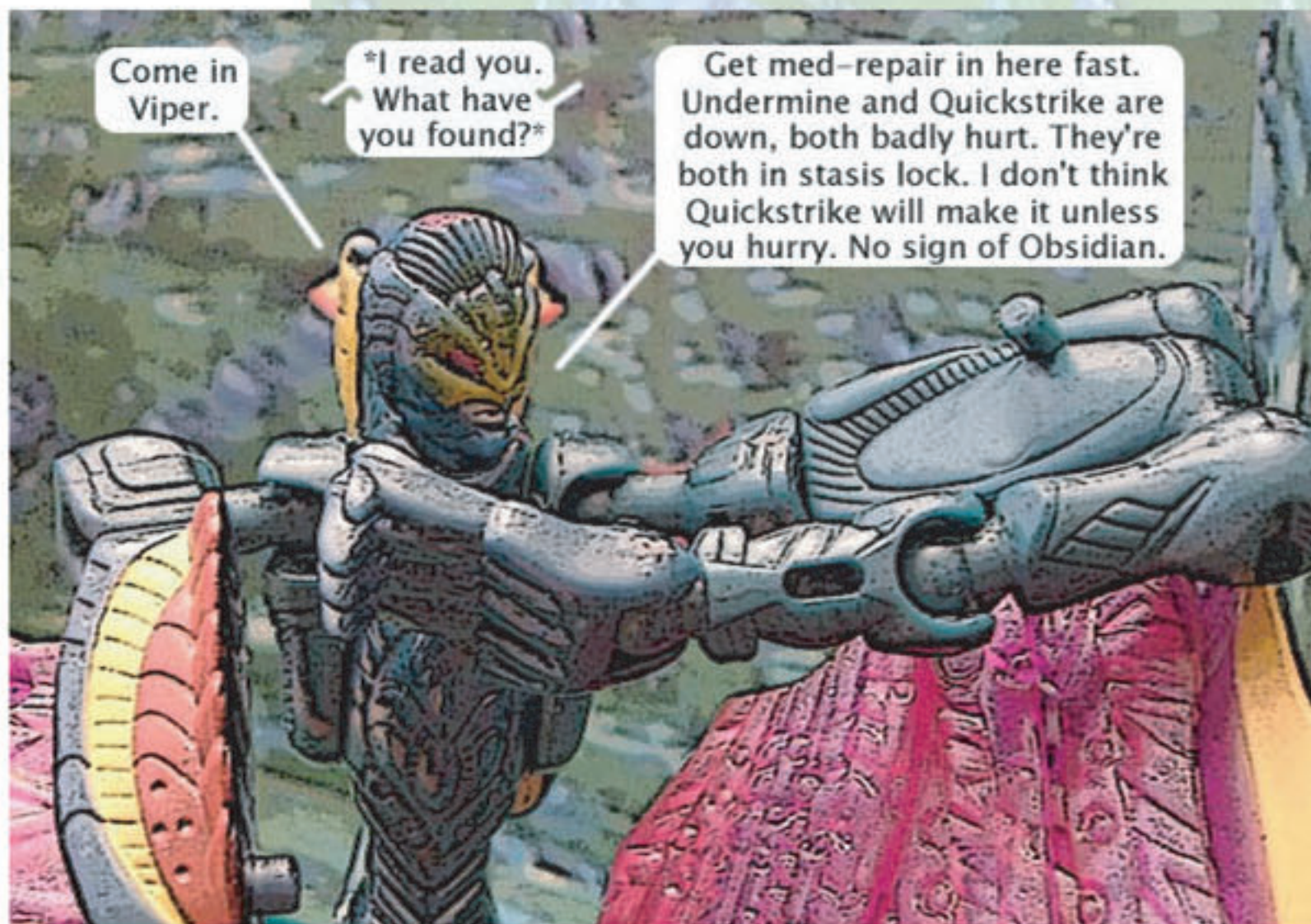
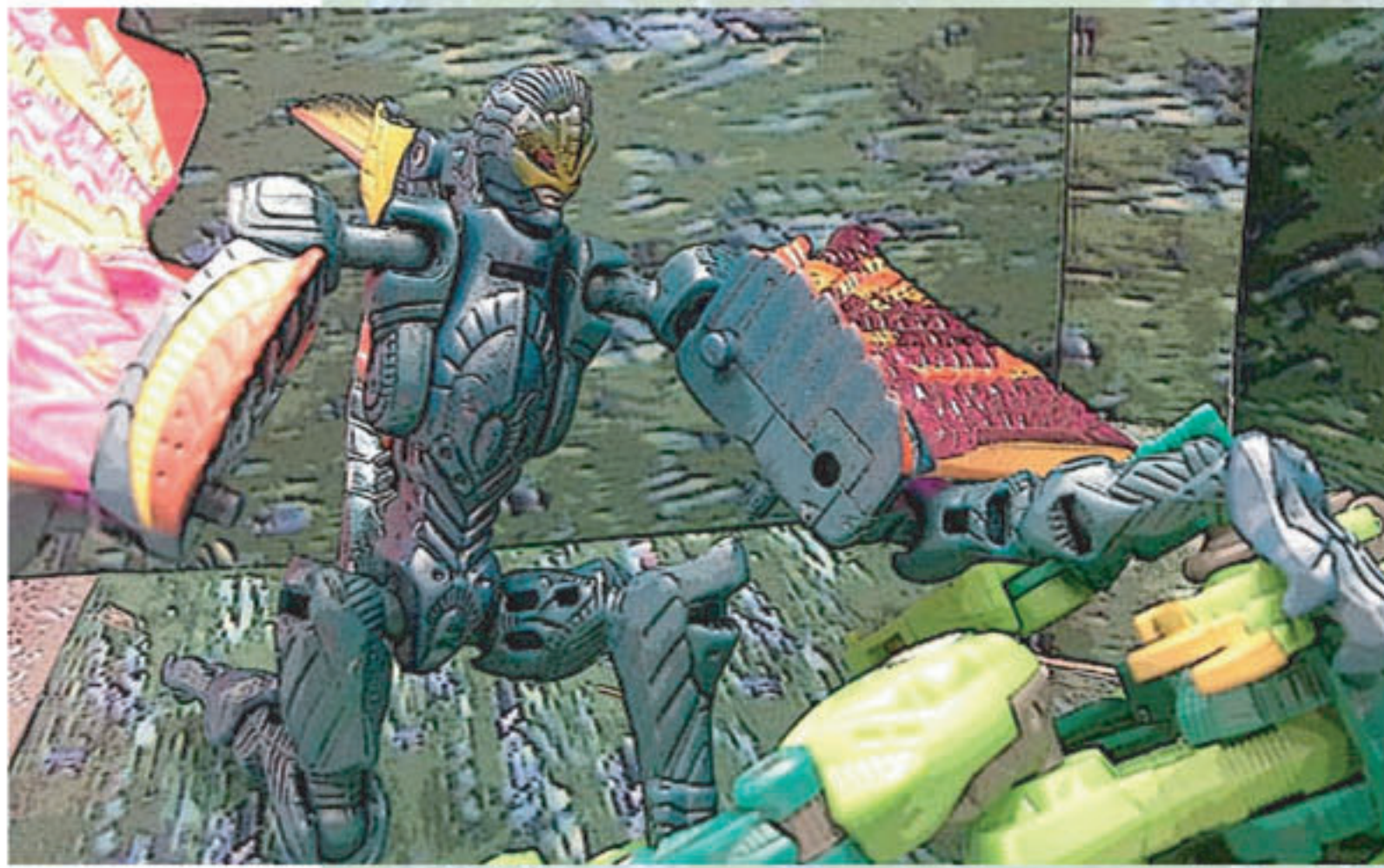




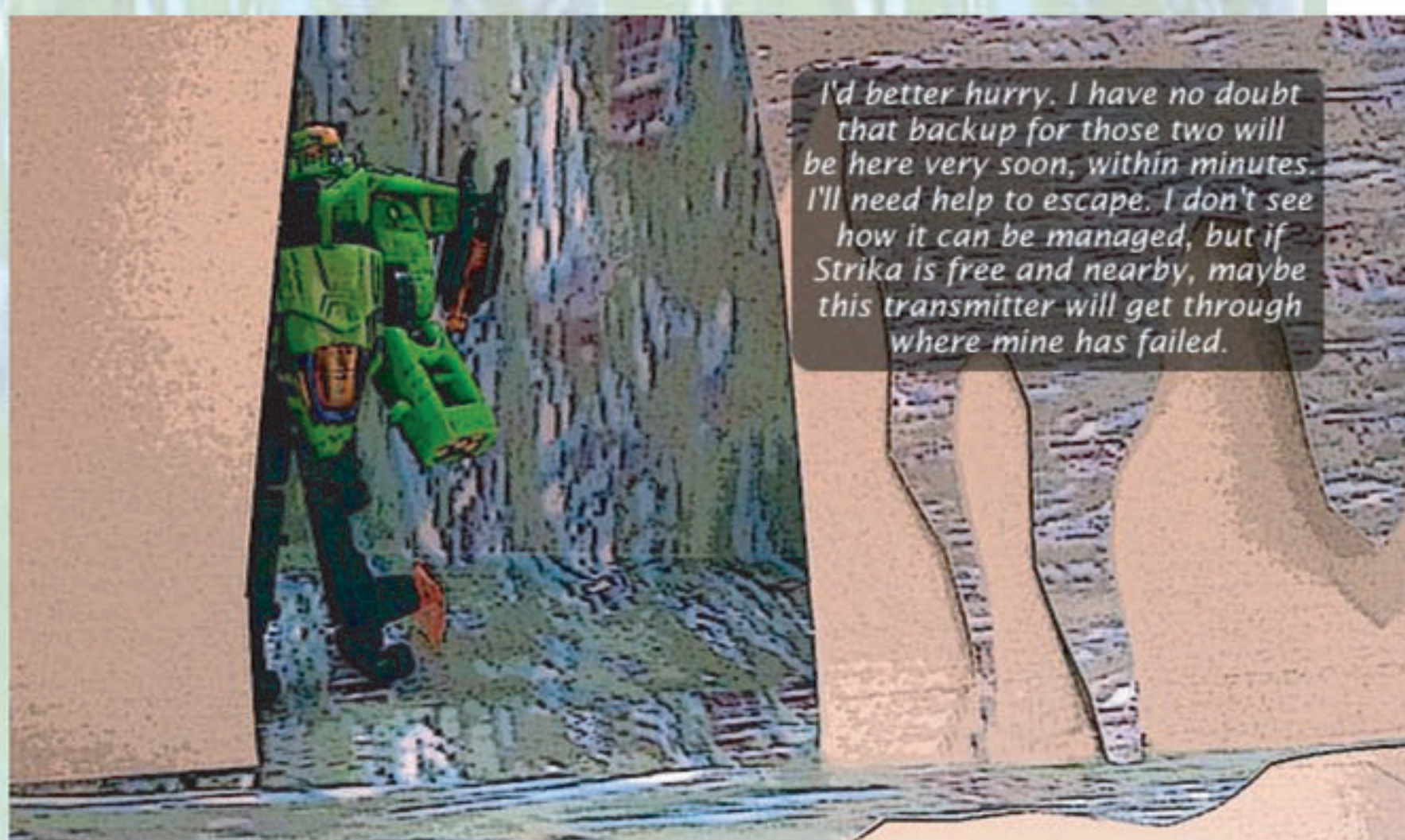
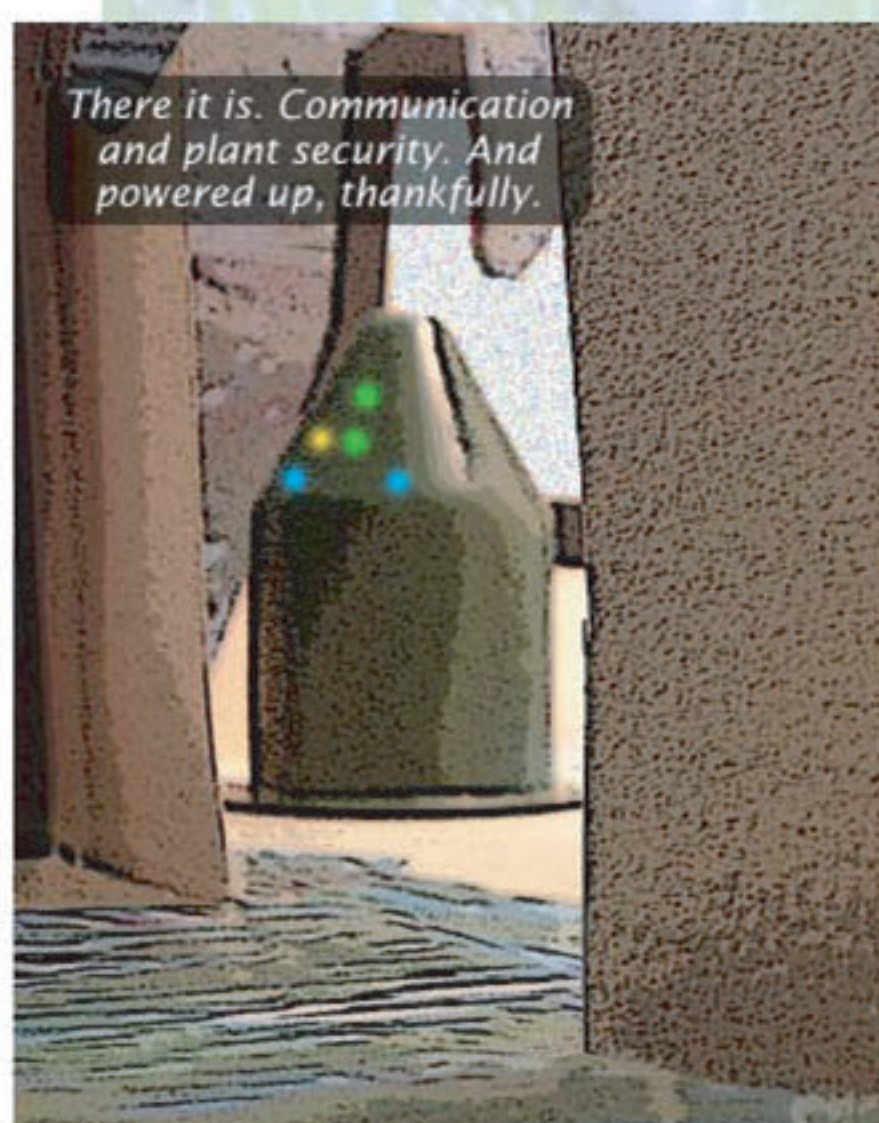
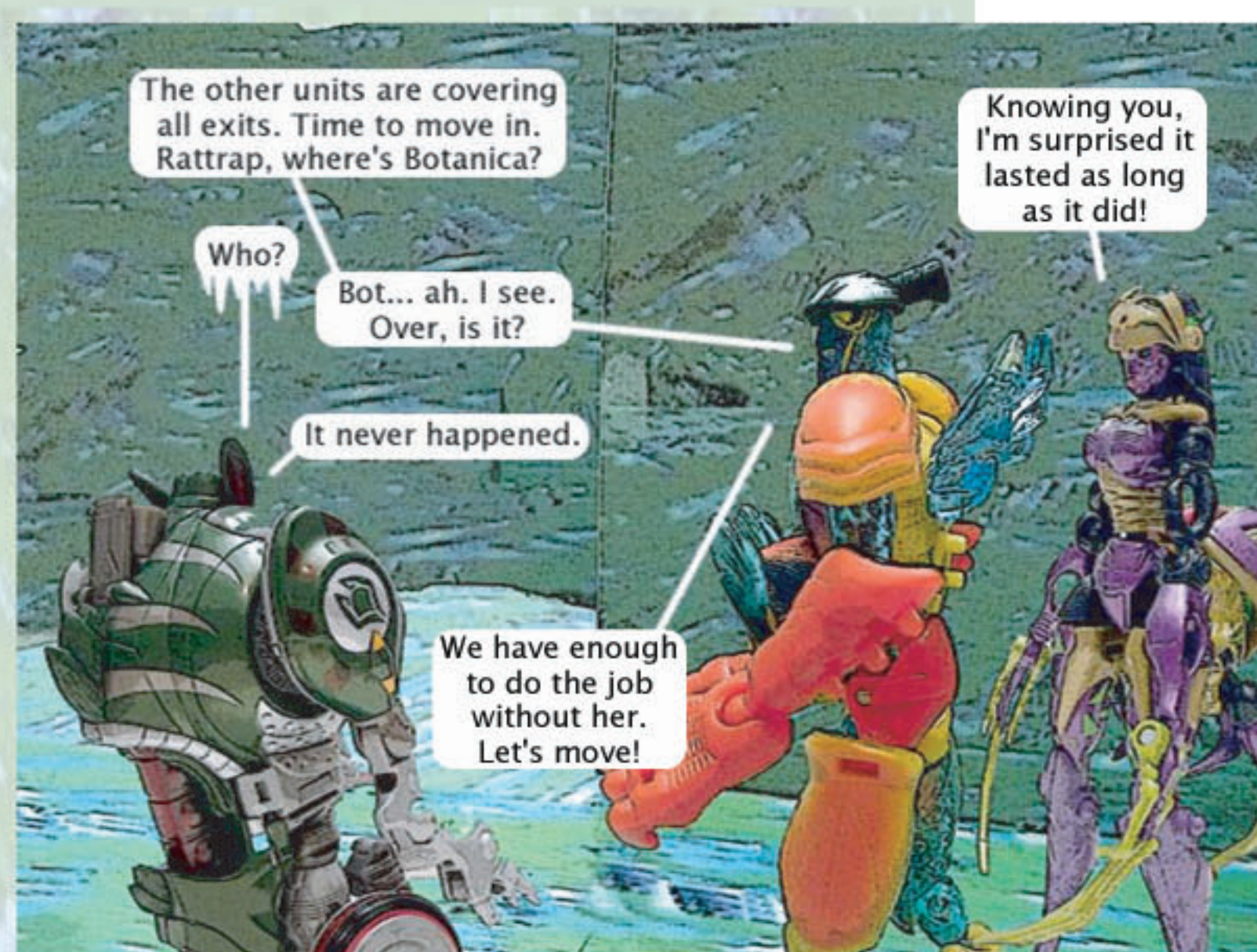
















Frequency... got it. Obsidian to Strika. Respond. Strika, can you hear me? I need backup.



I'm in the old industrial coolant processing plant. I don't have much time. I need backup urgently.



Strika, can you...



Nnhn!

Ungh!



Aaagh!

\*THUD\*

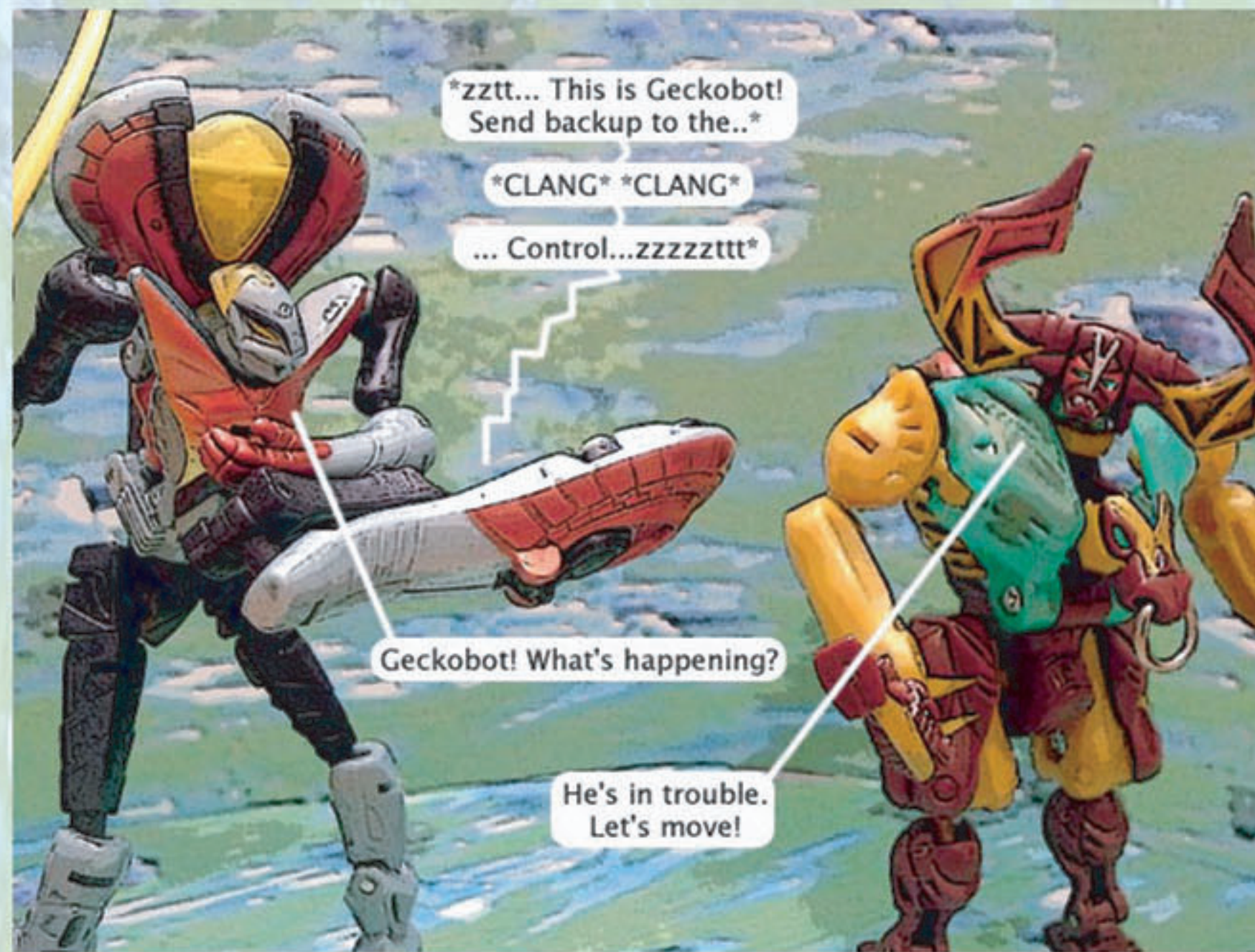
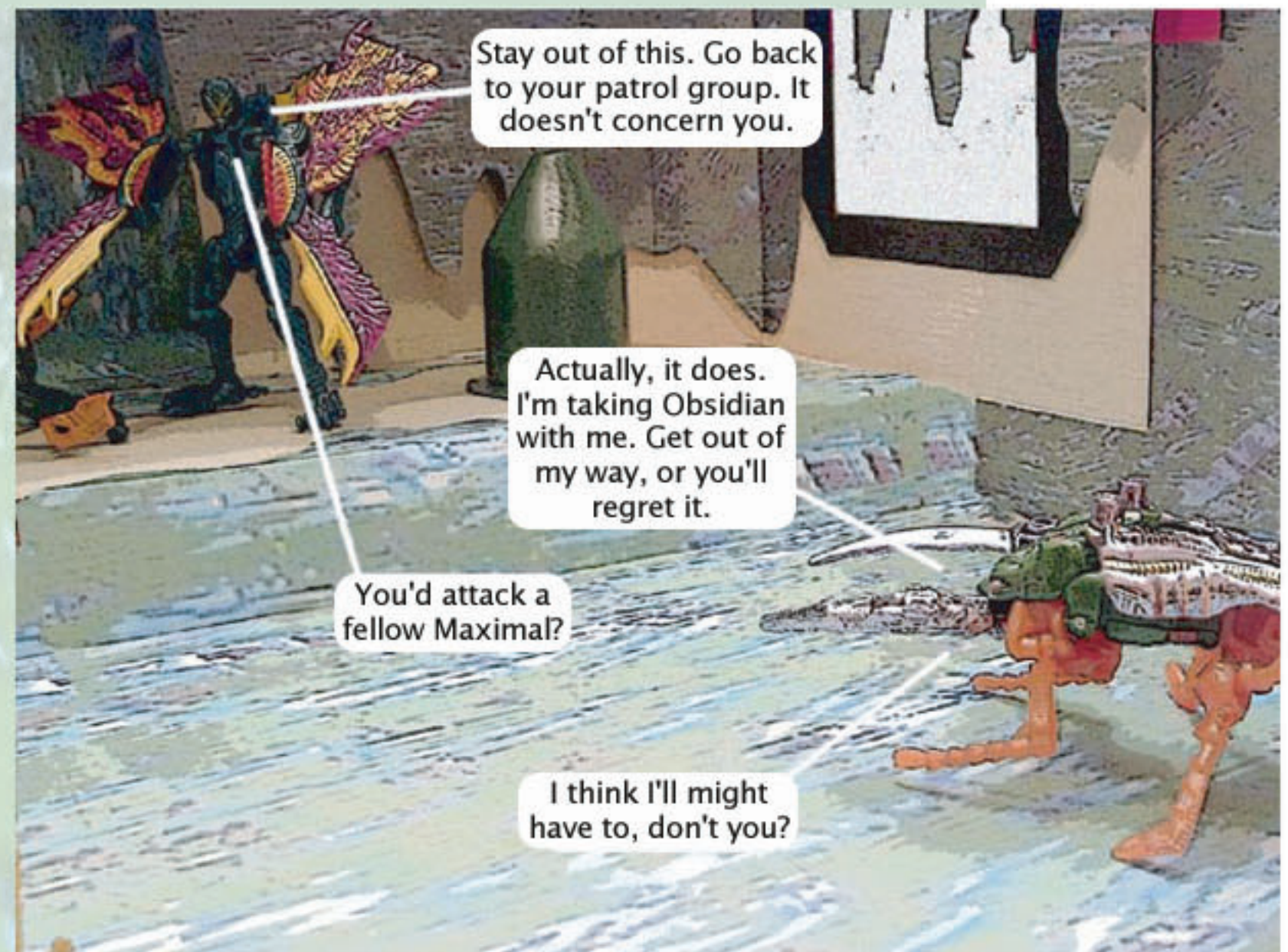


Now..

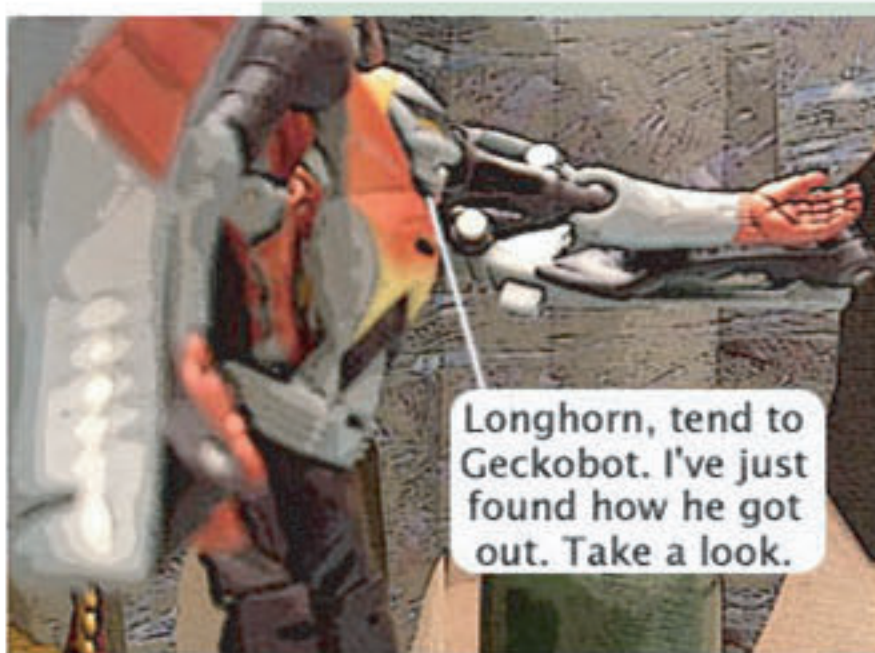


.. you're going to pay for what you did to my friends.

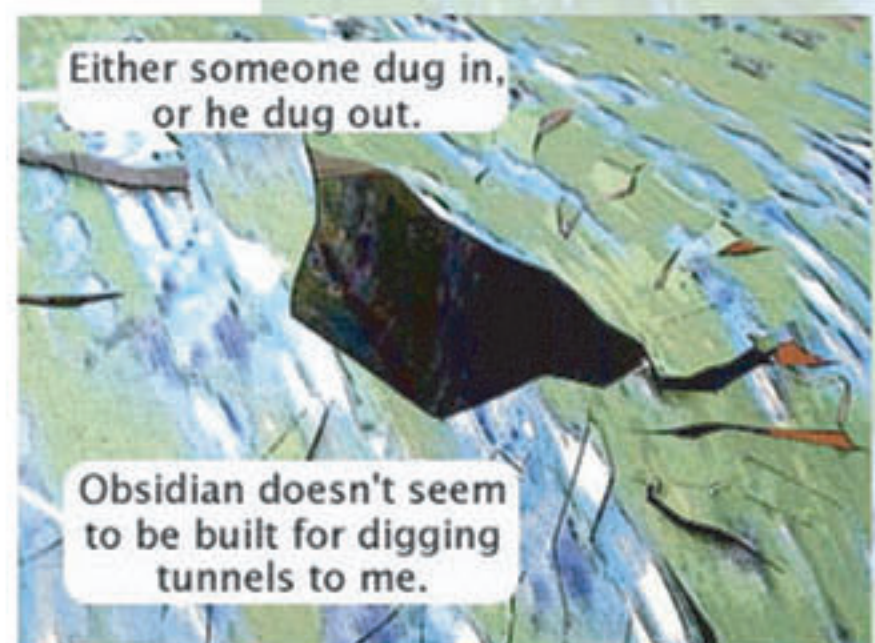








Longhorn, tend to Geckobot. I've just found how he got out. Take a look.

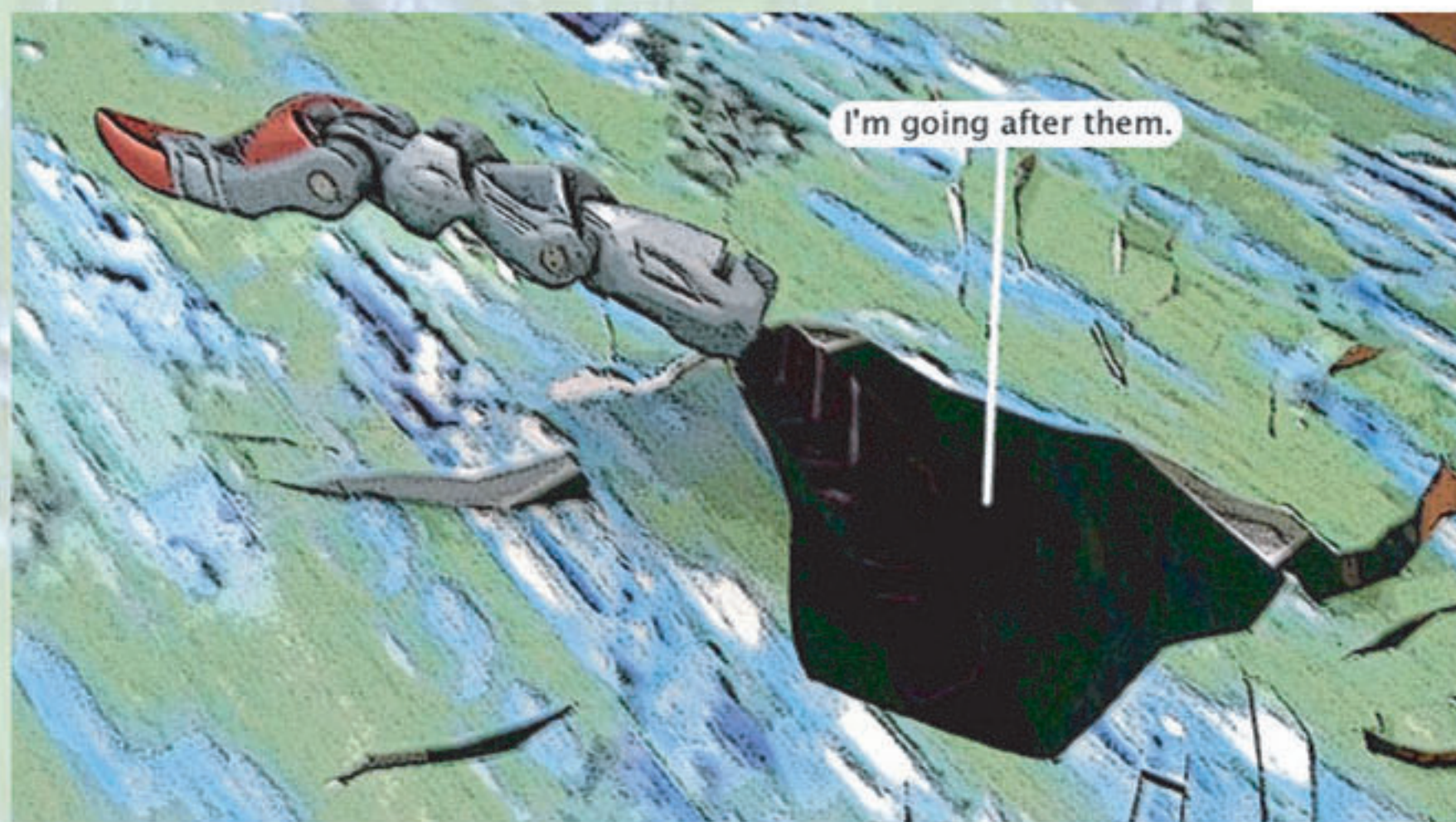


Either someone dug in, or he dug out.

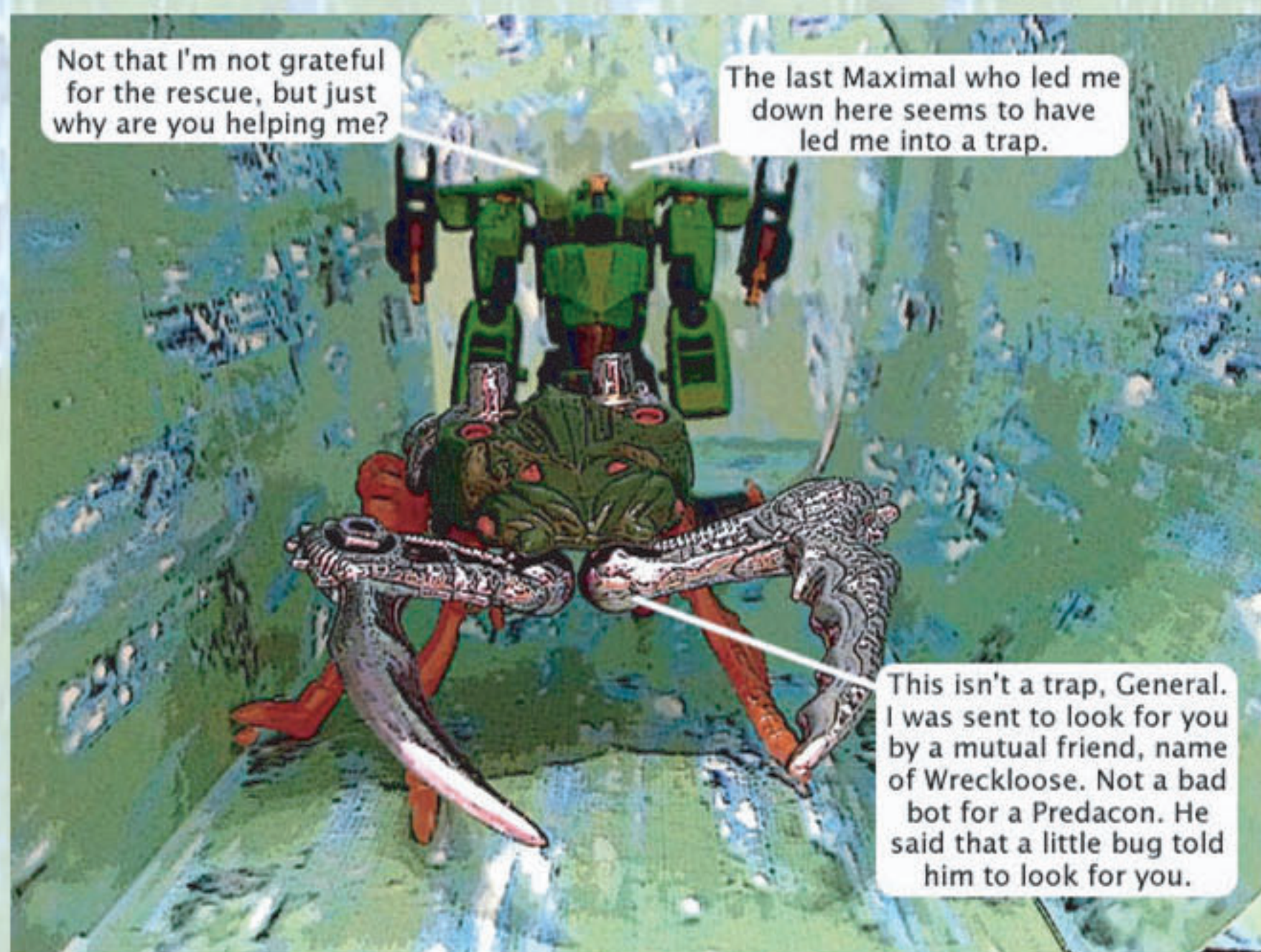
Obsidian doesn't seem to be built for digging tunnels to me.



No, he doesn't. Someone's helping him. Let Silverbolt know what's happened.



I'm going after them.



Not that I'm not grateful for the rescue, but just why are you helping me?

The last Maximal who led me down here seems to have led me into a trap.

This isn't a trap, General. I was sent to look for you by a mutual friend, name of Wreckloose. Not a bad bot for a Predacon. He said that a little bug told him to look for you.



Waspinator?

The same. It seems he's found something that you need to see.





Here's our way out.  
We can follow the  
coolant channel for  
quite a ways. Hurry.



We don't want  
them to follow us.

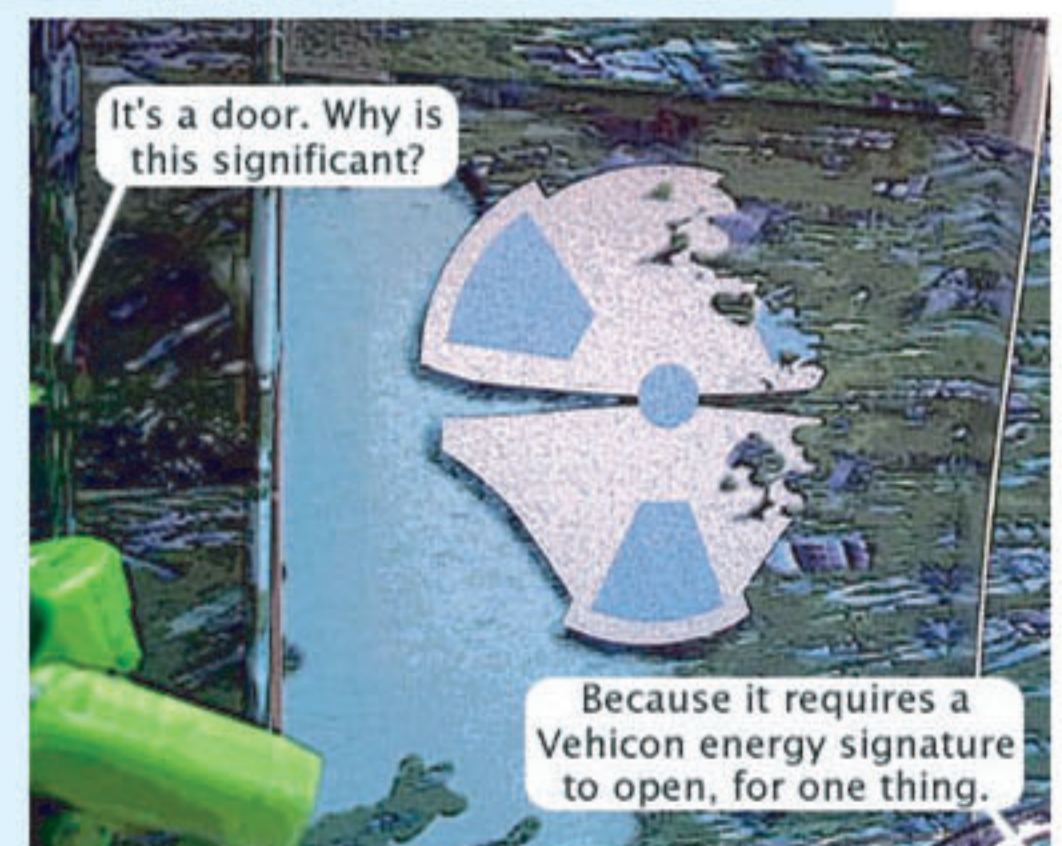
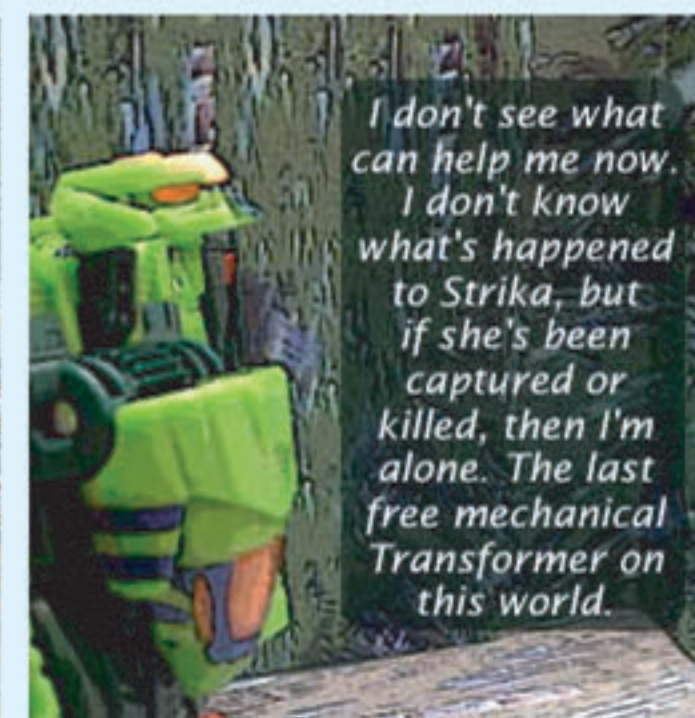
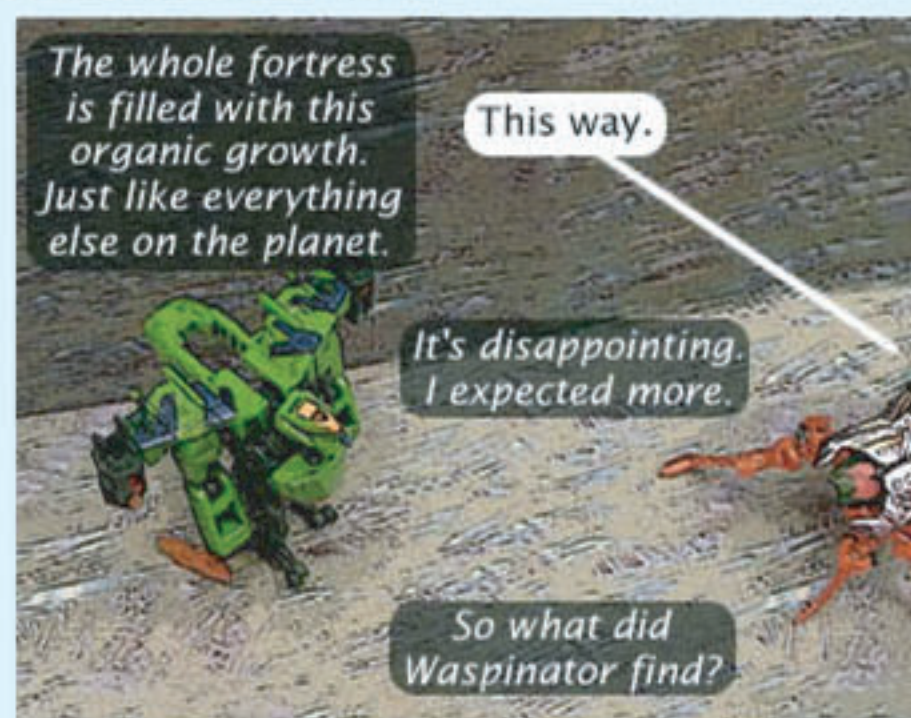
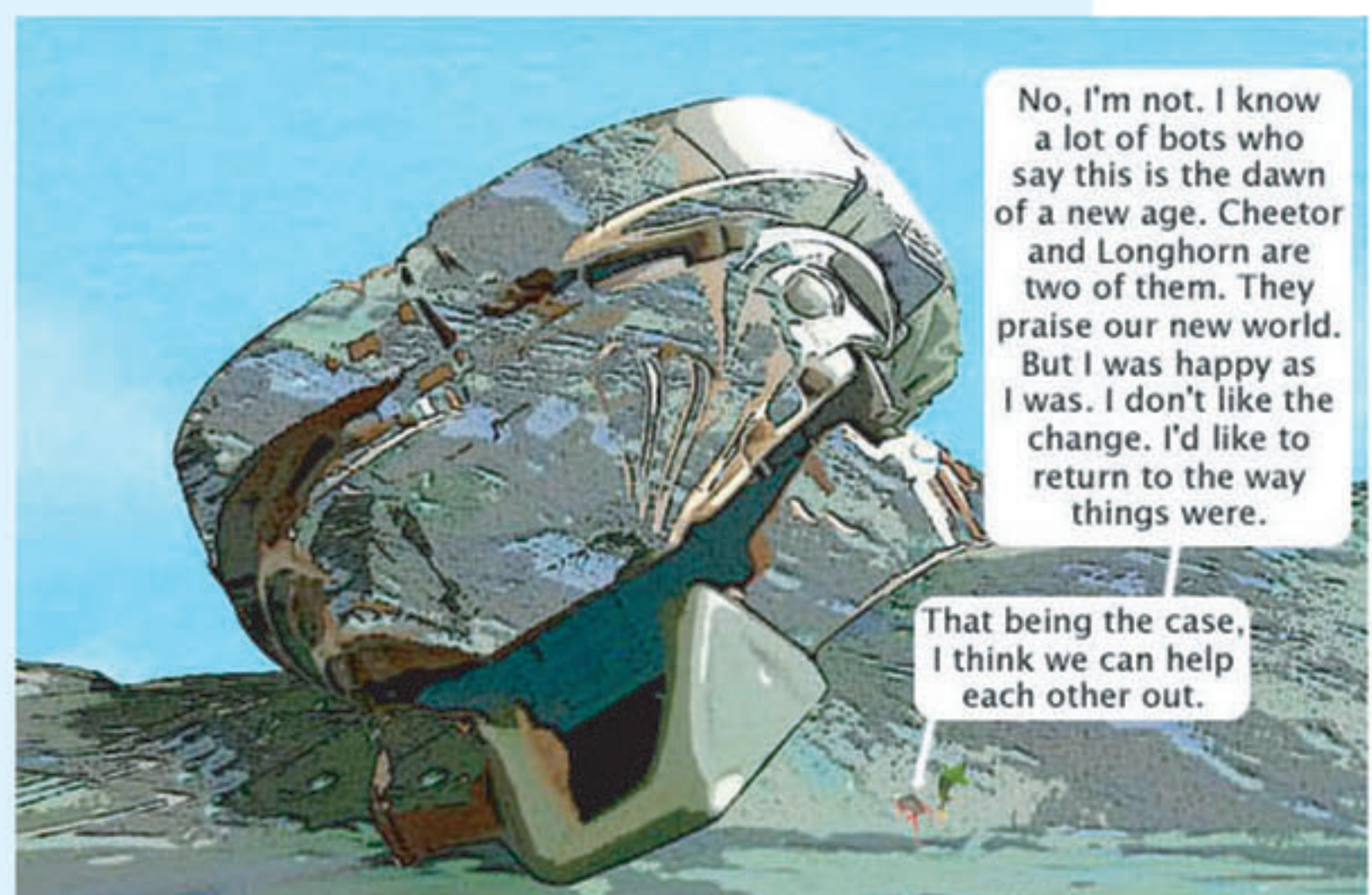
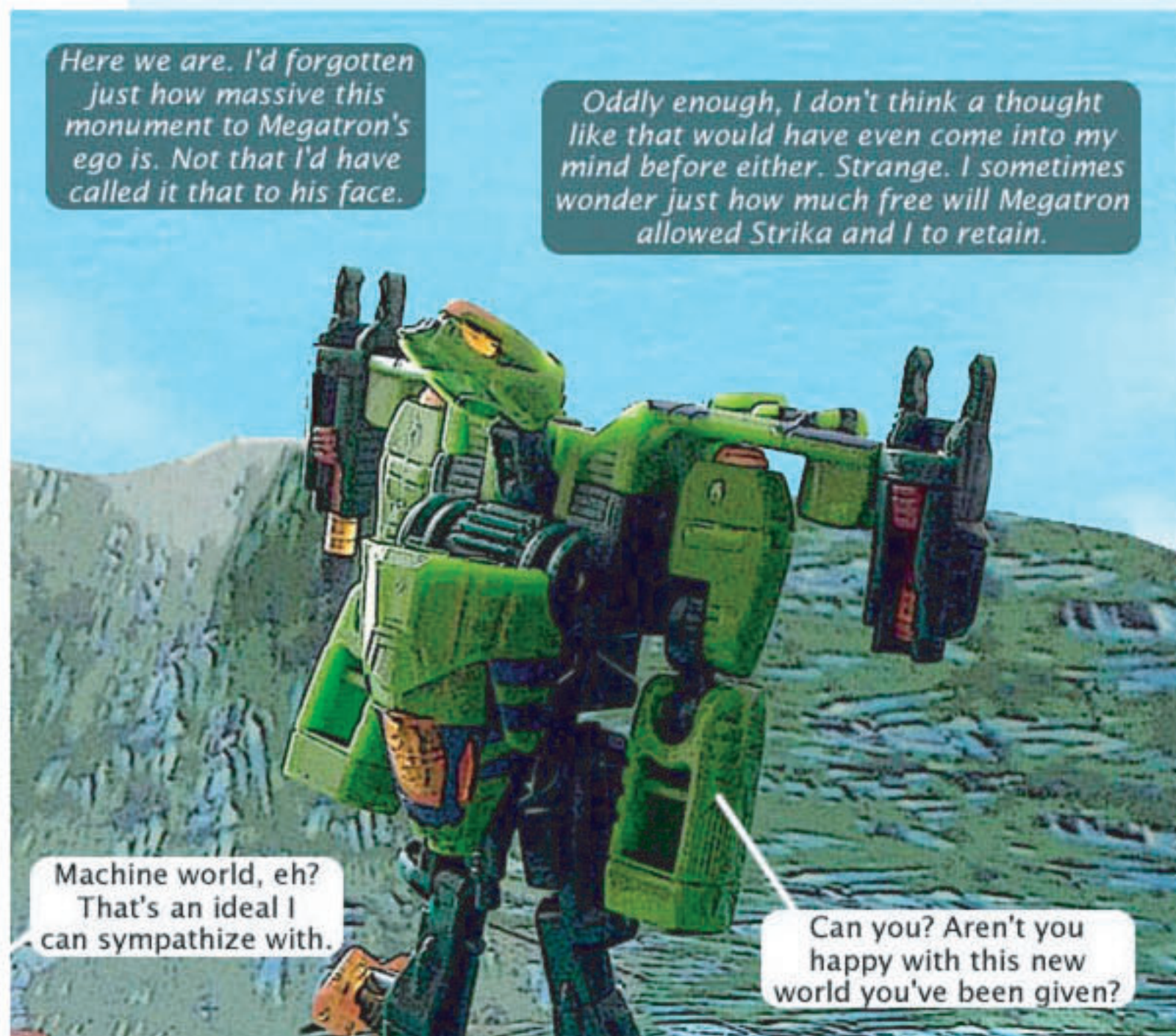
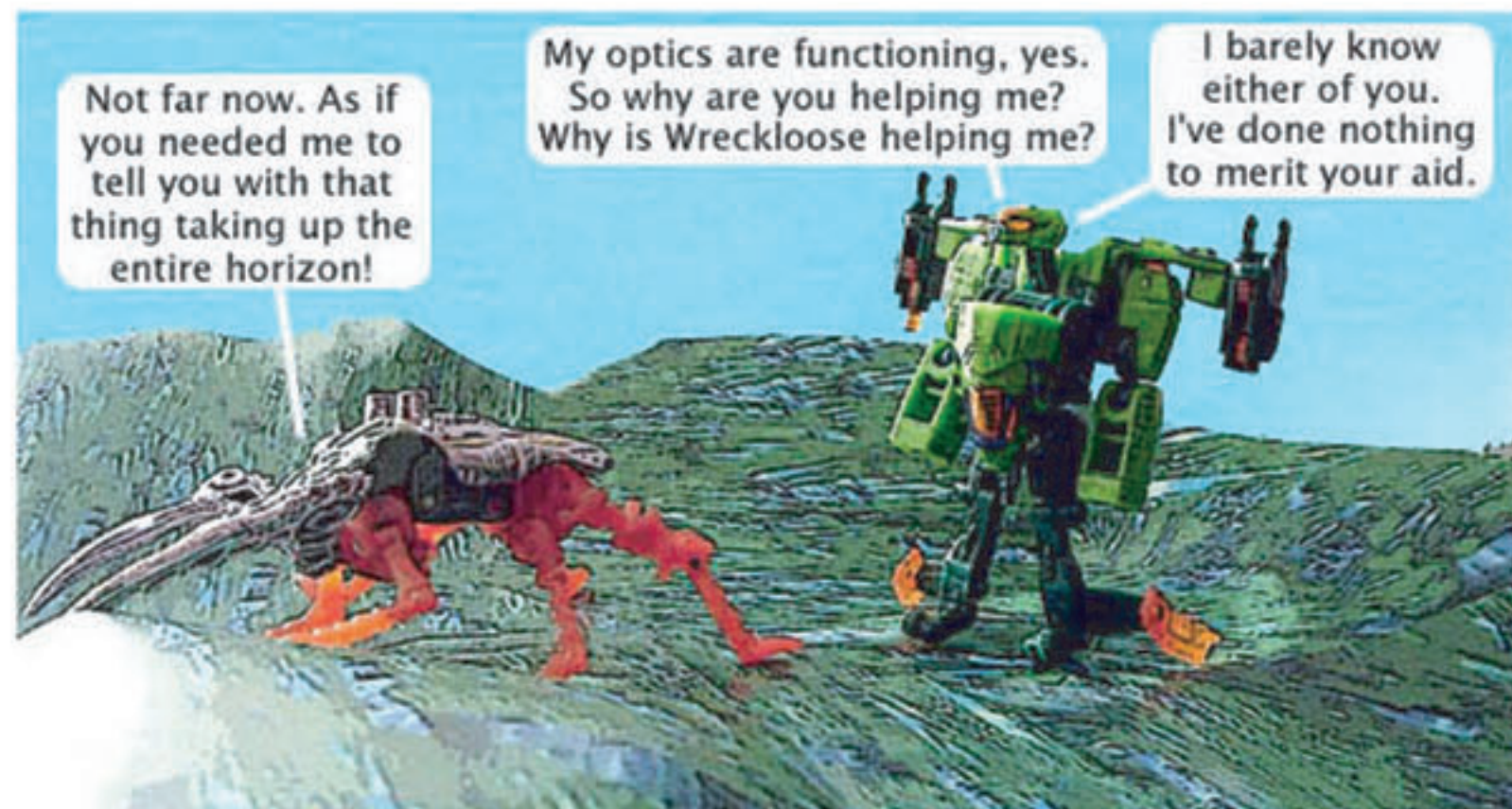


Night Viper to Silverbolt.

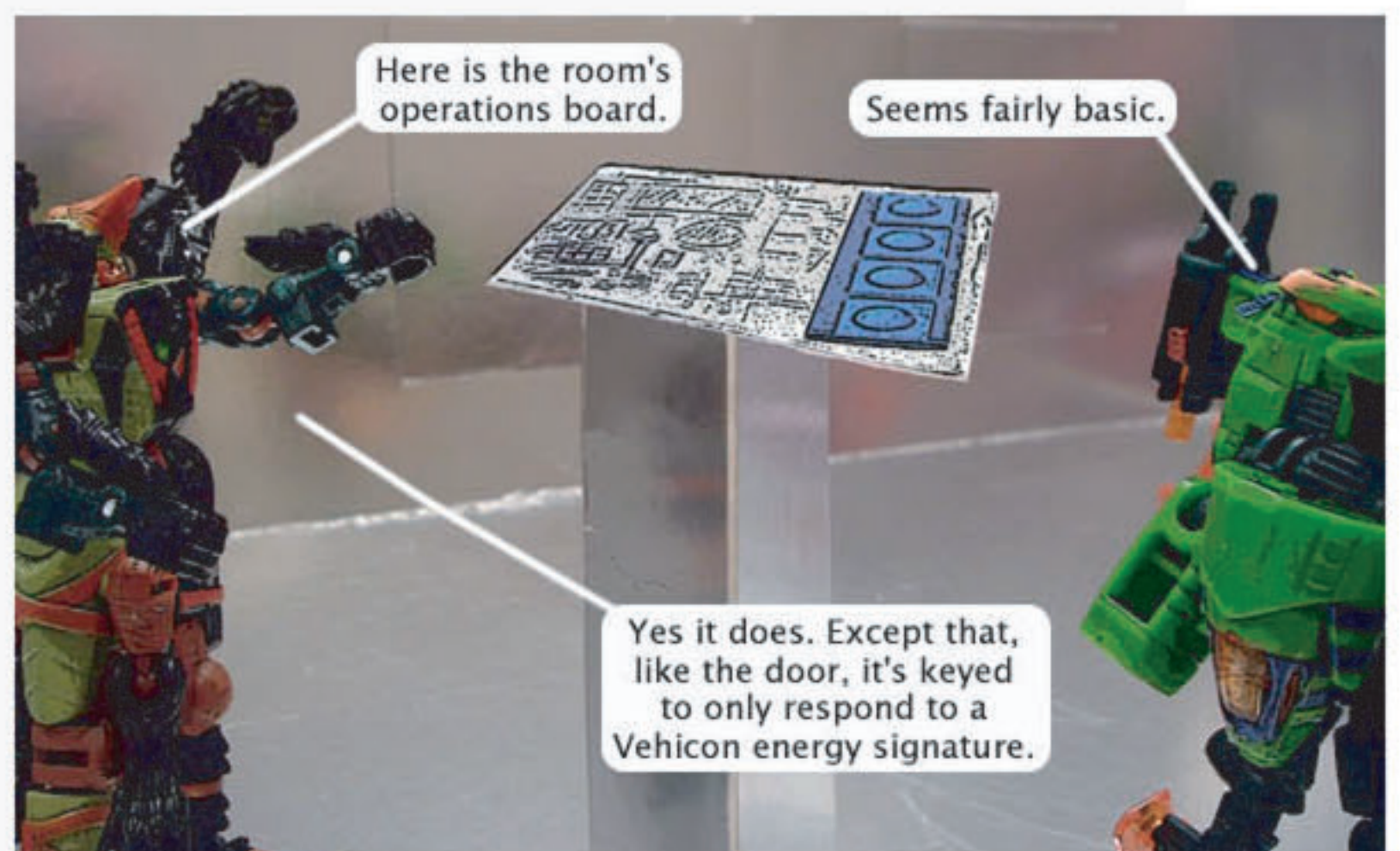
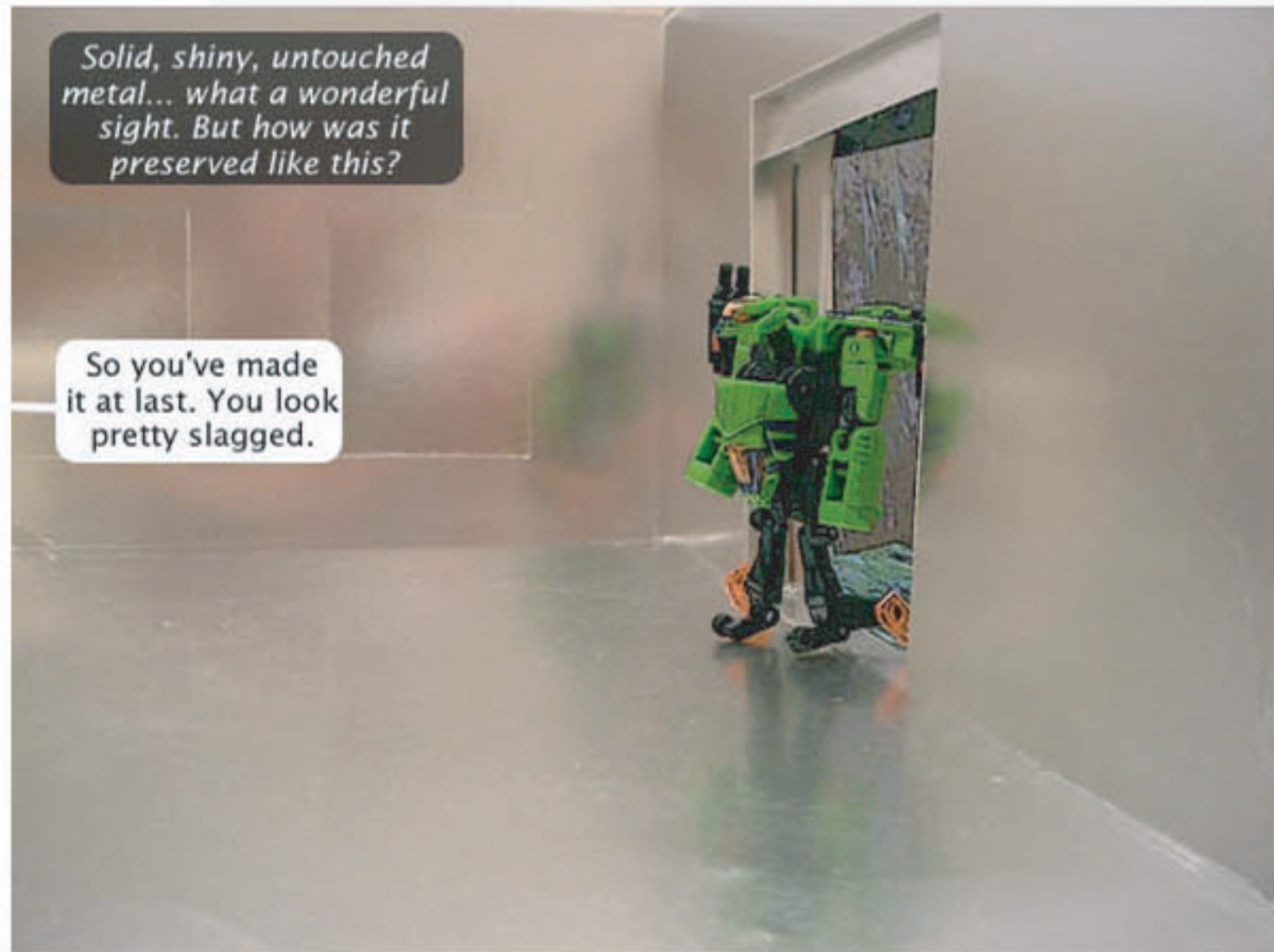
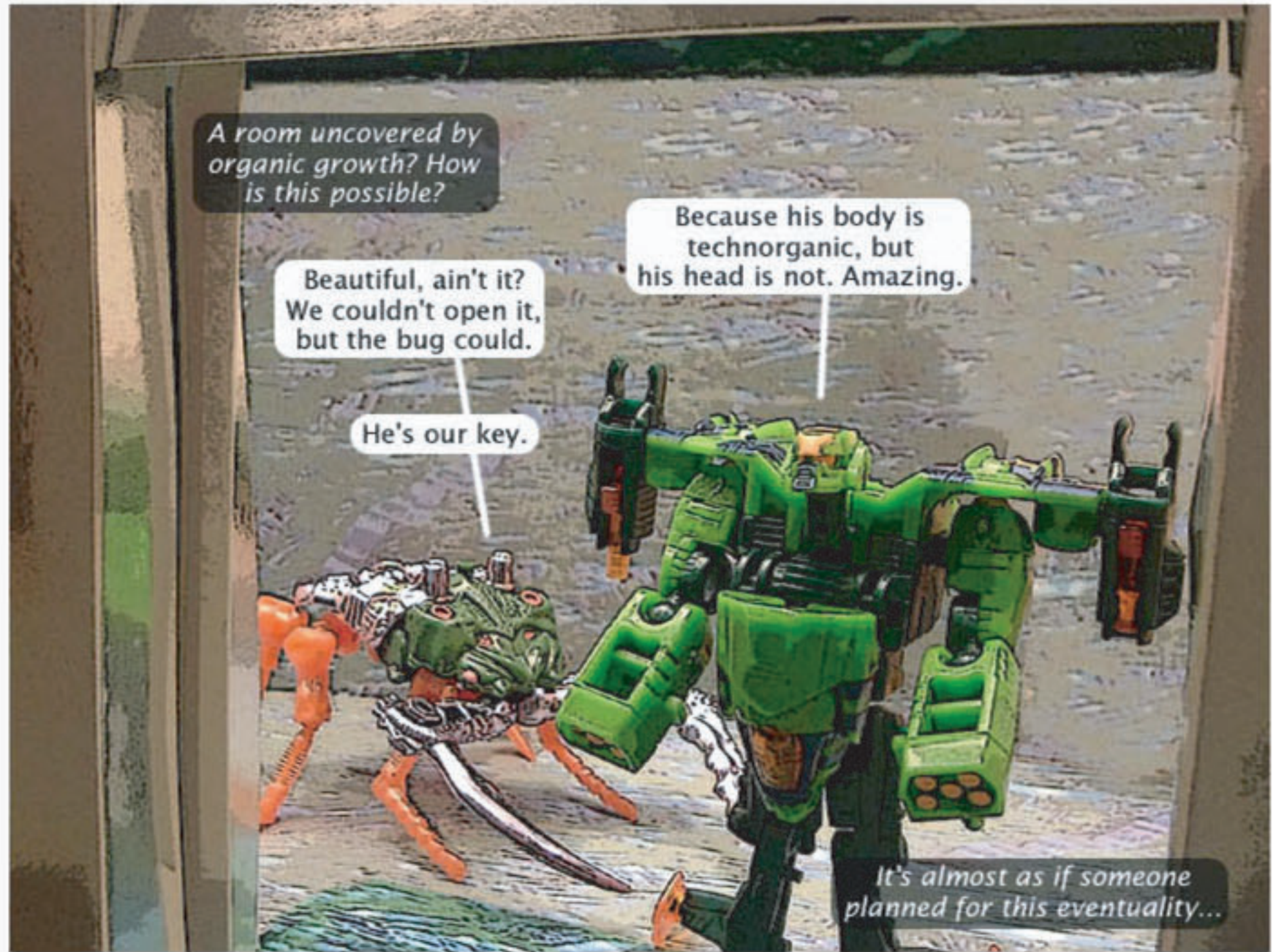
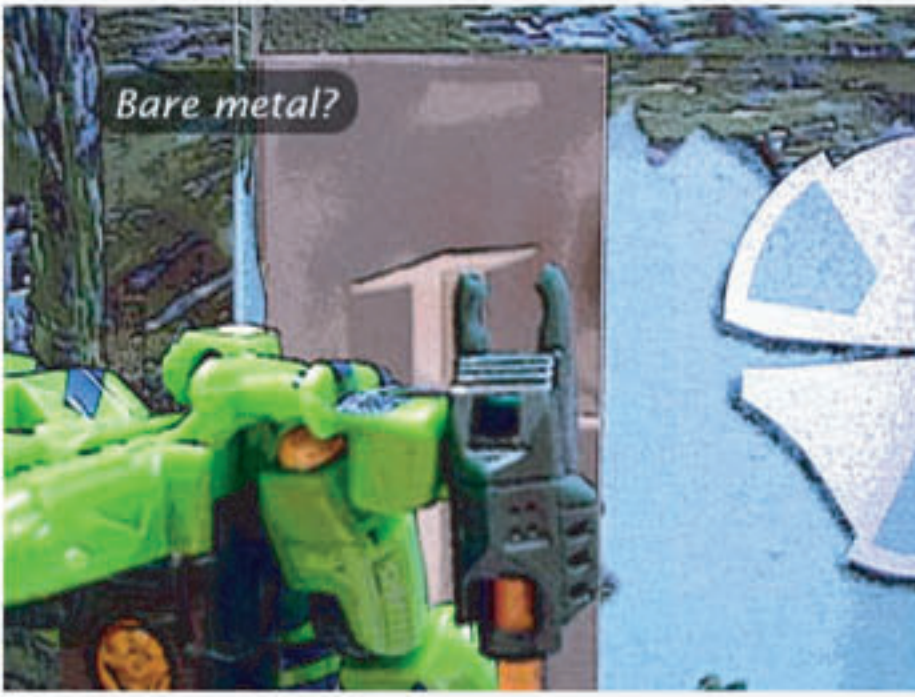
I think I know  
where they're headed.



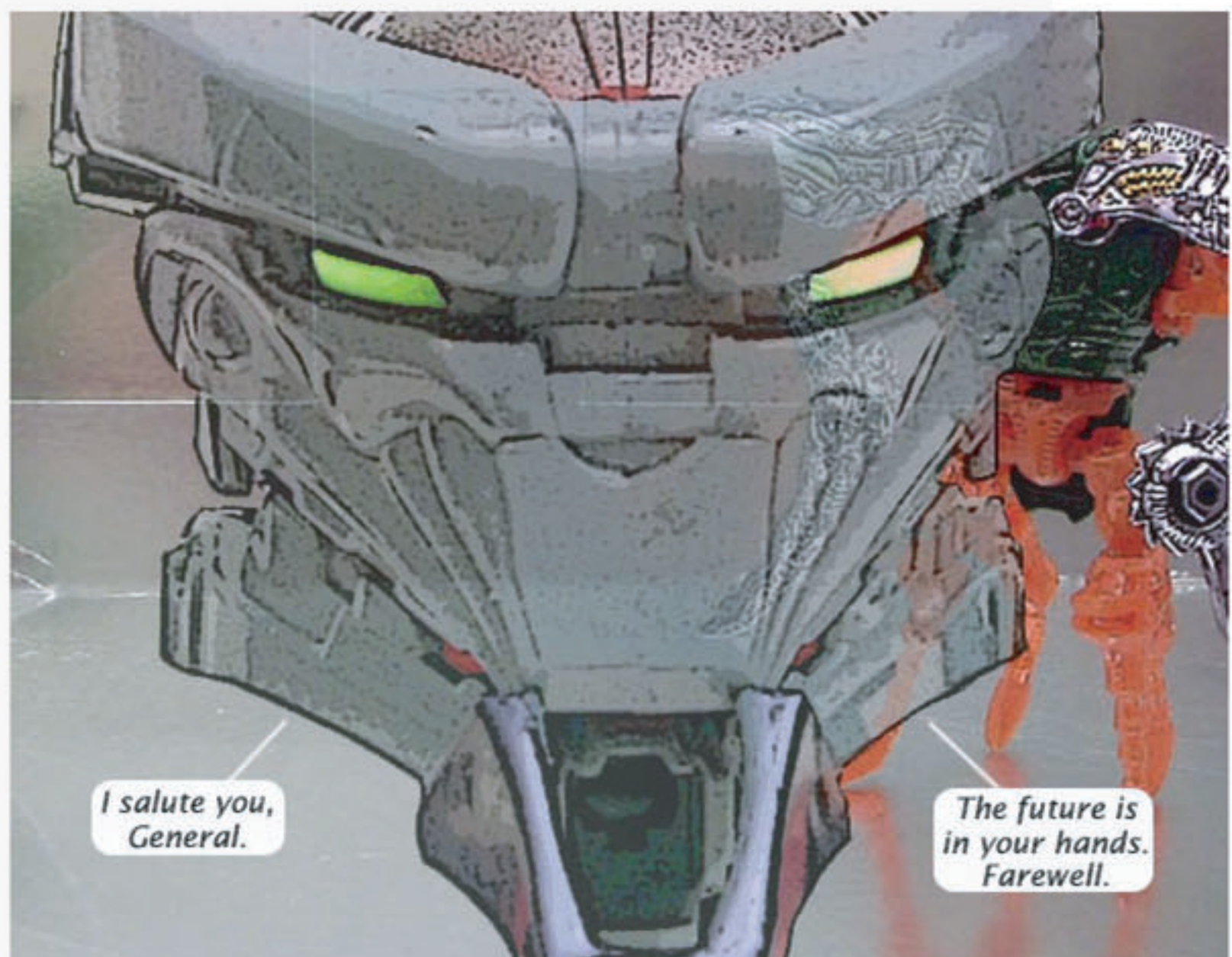
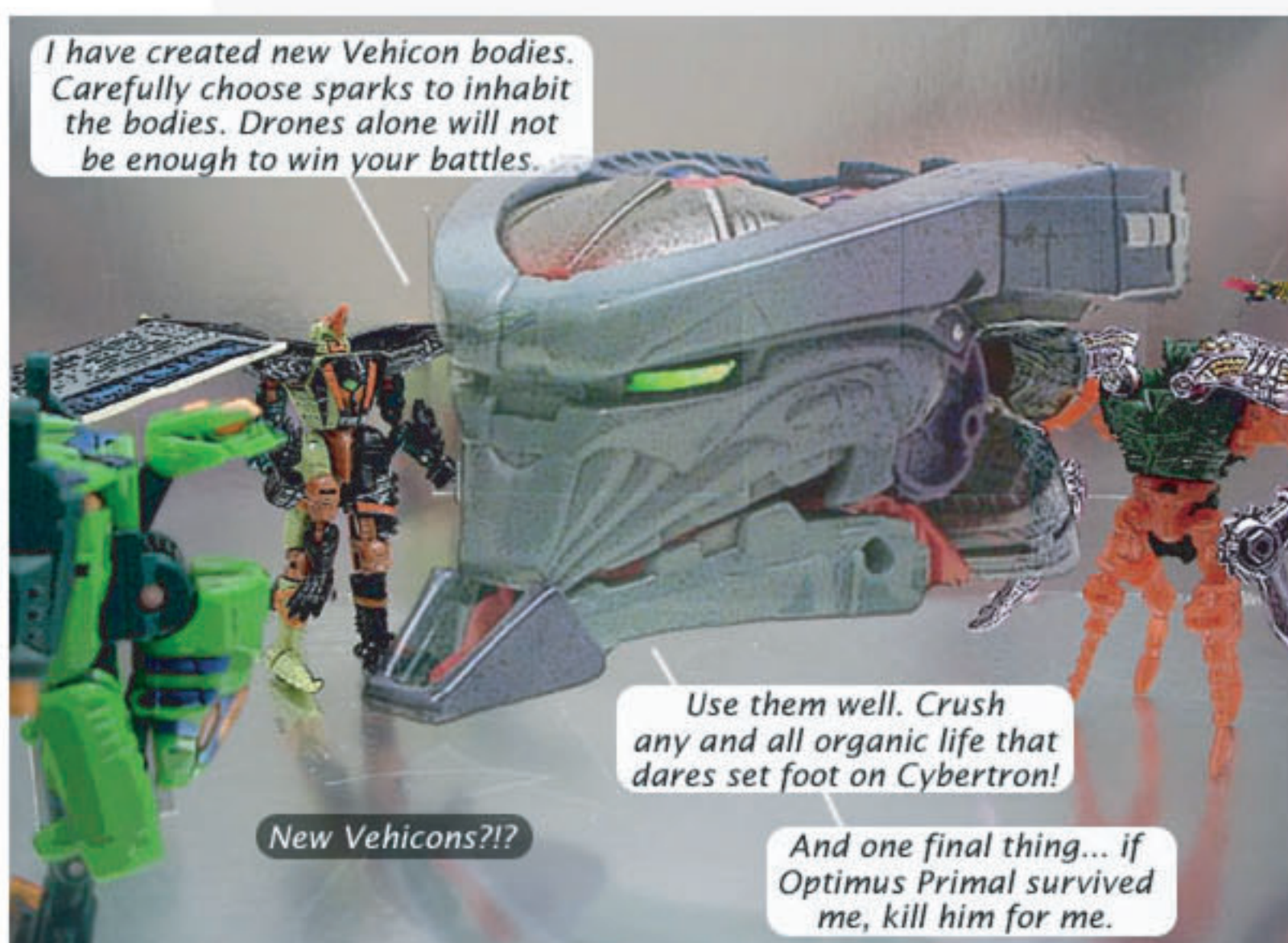
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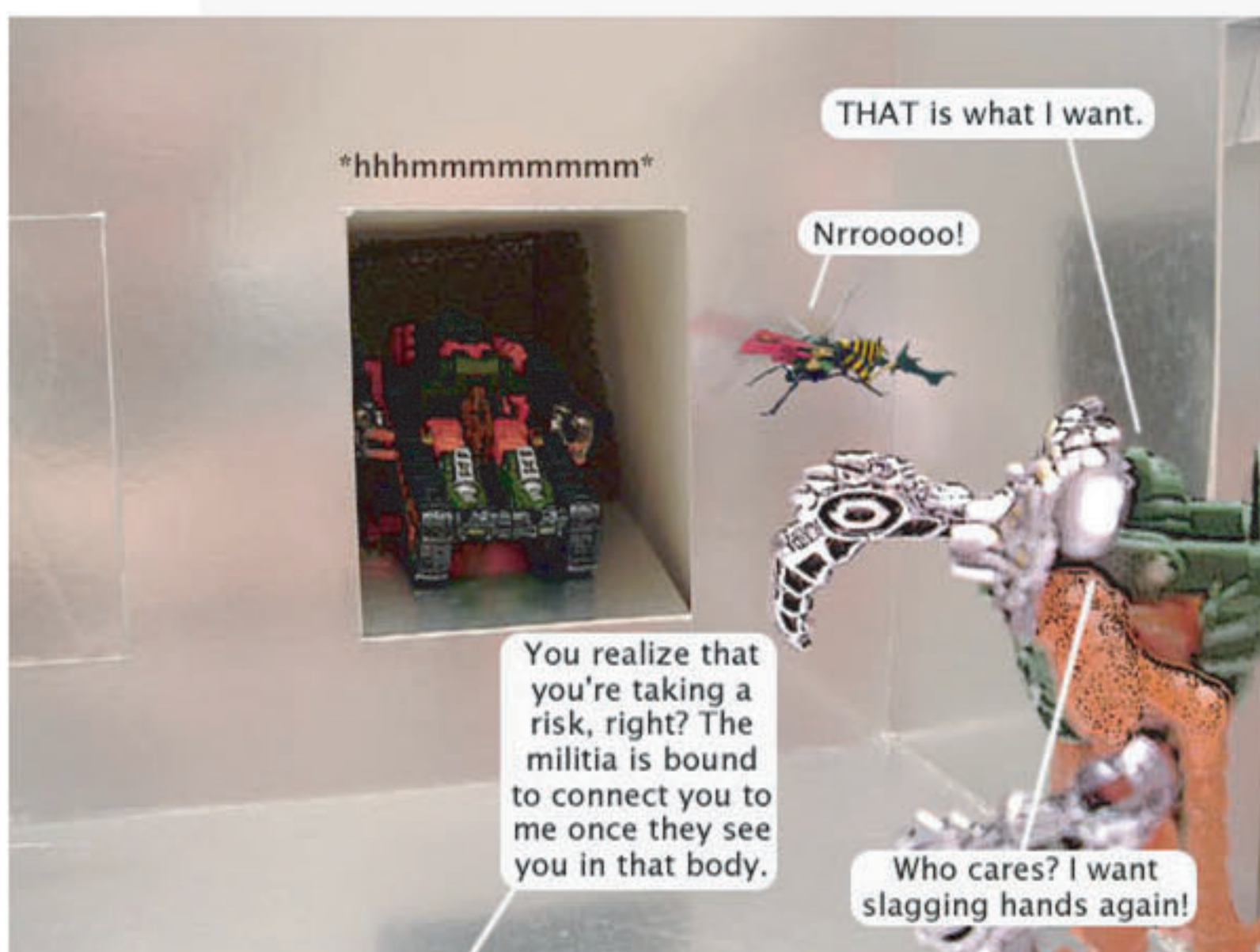
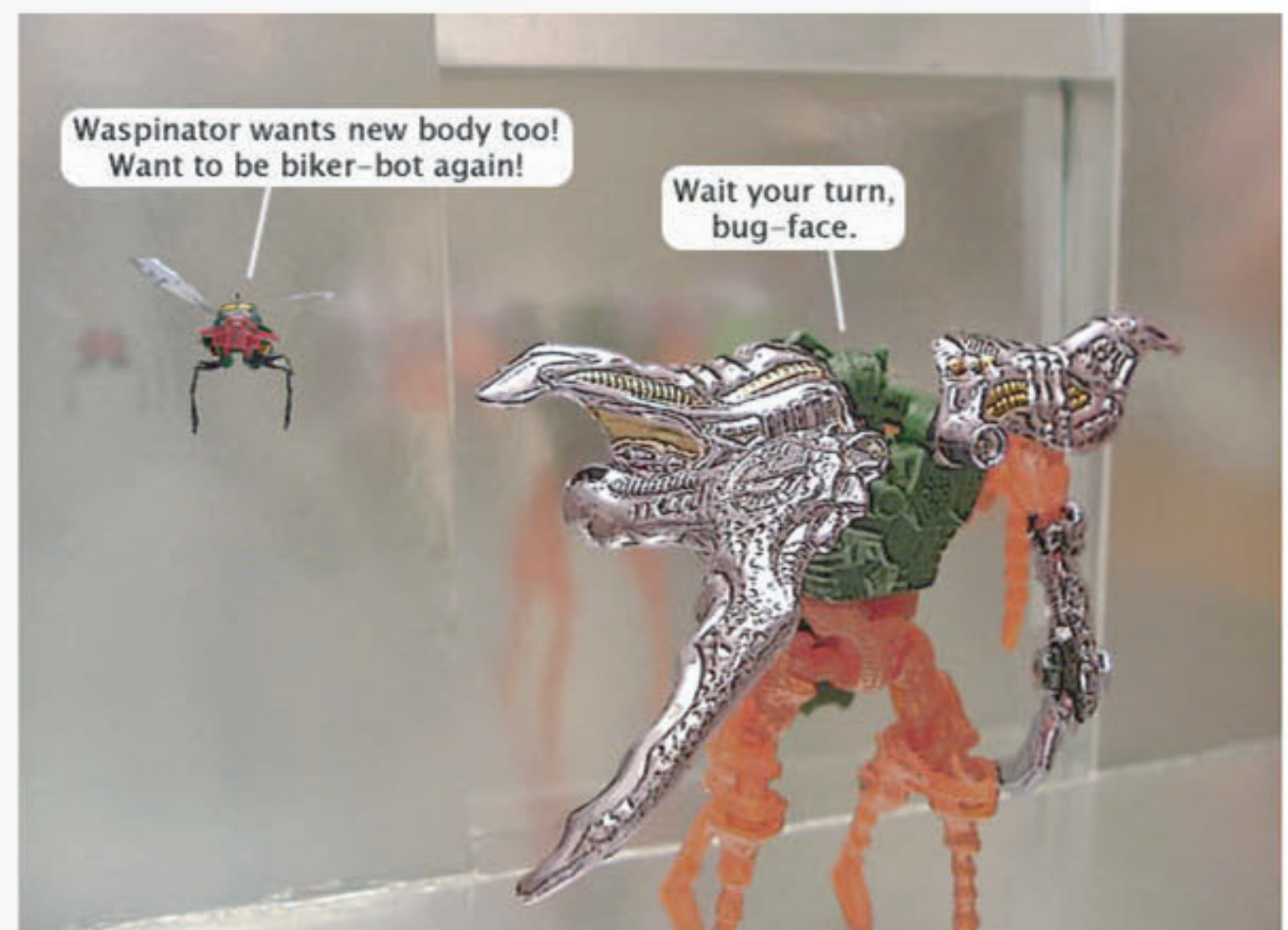
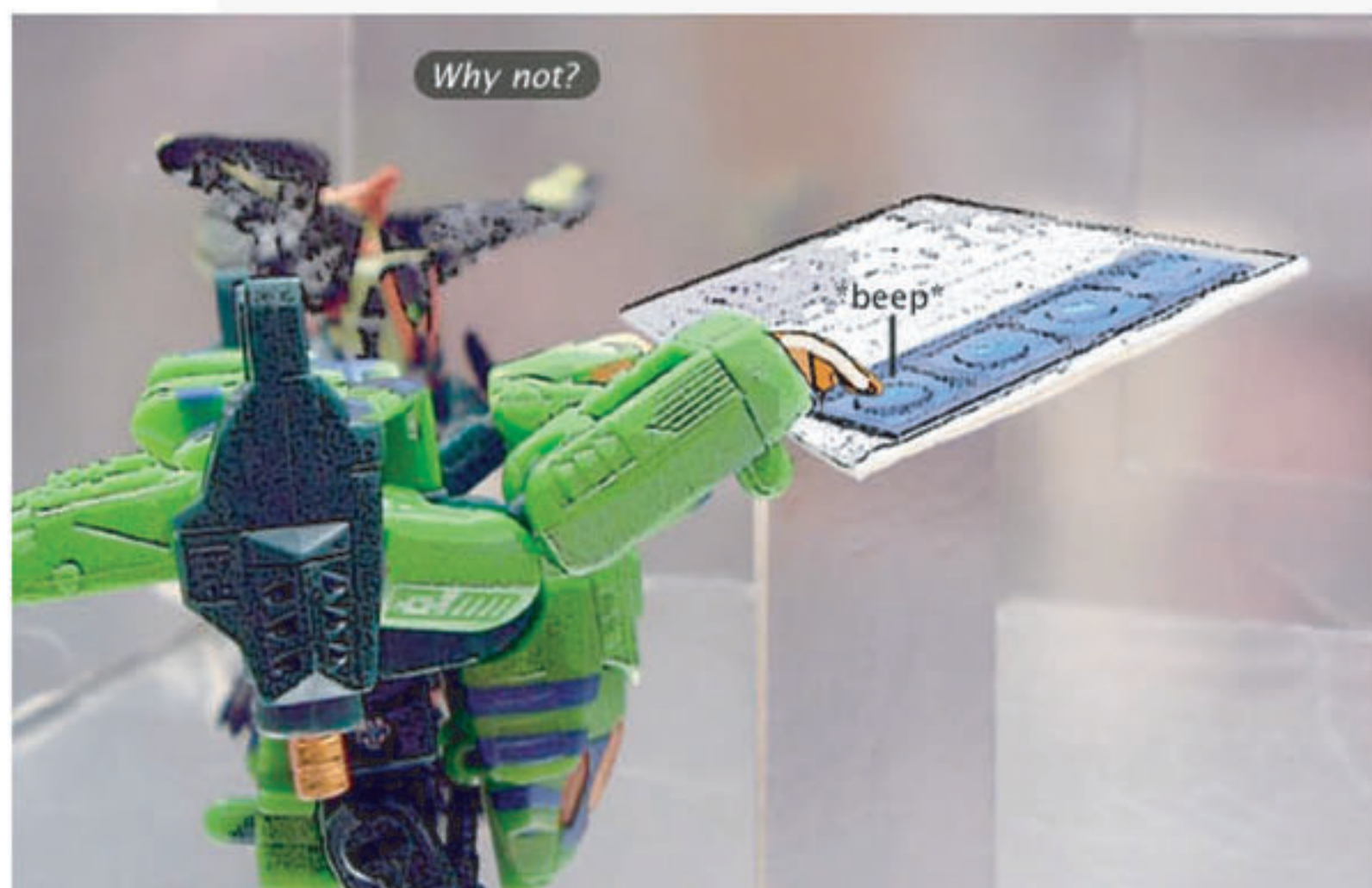




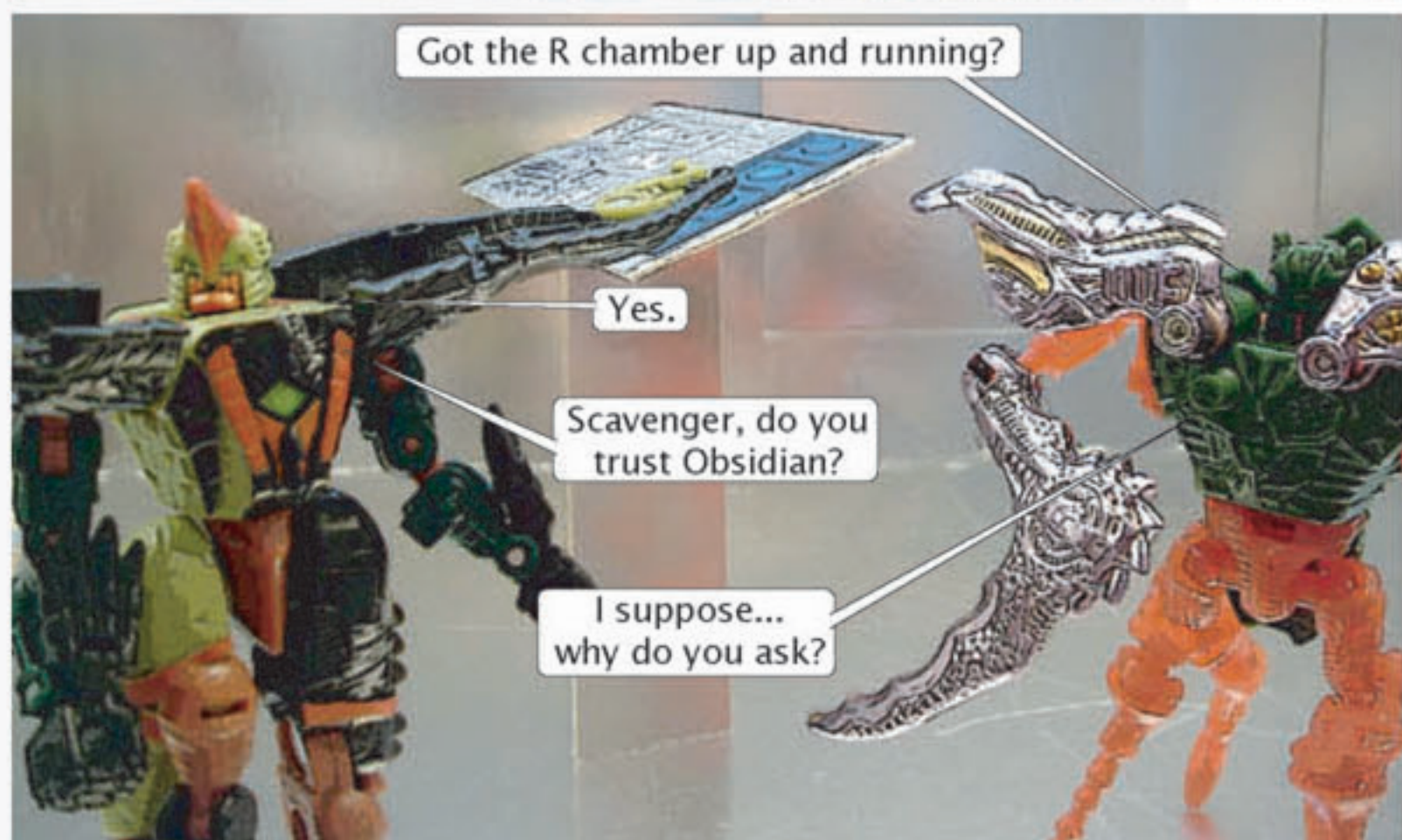
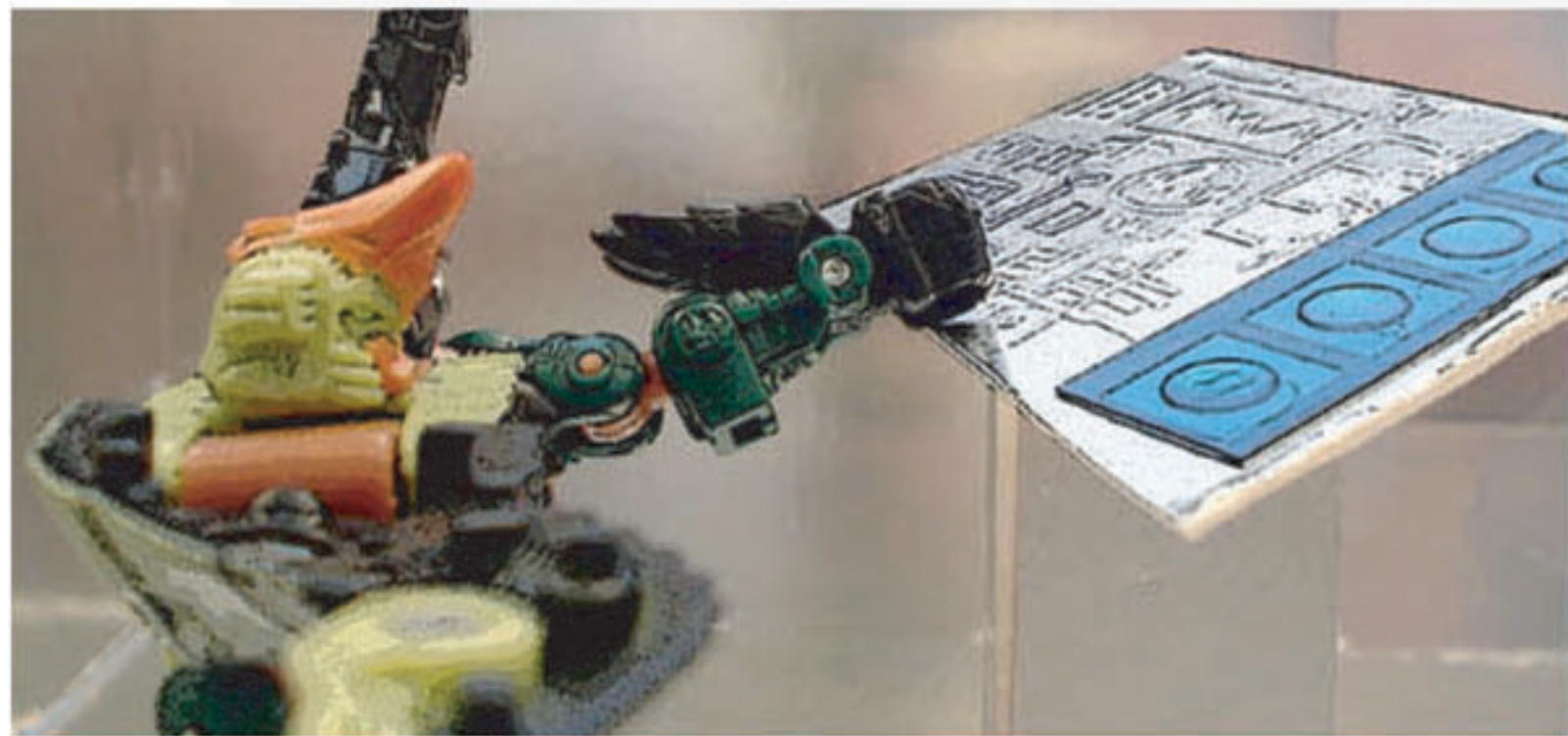
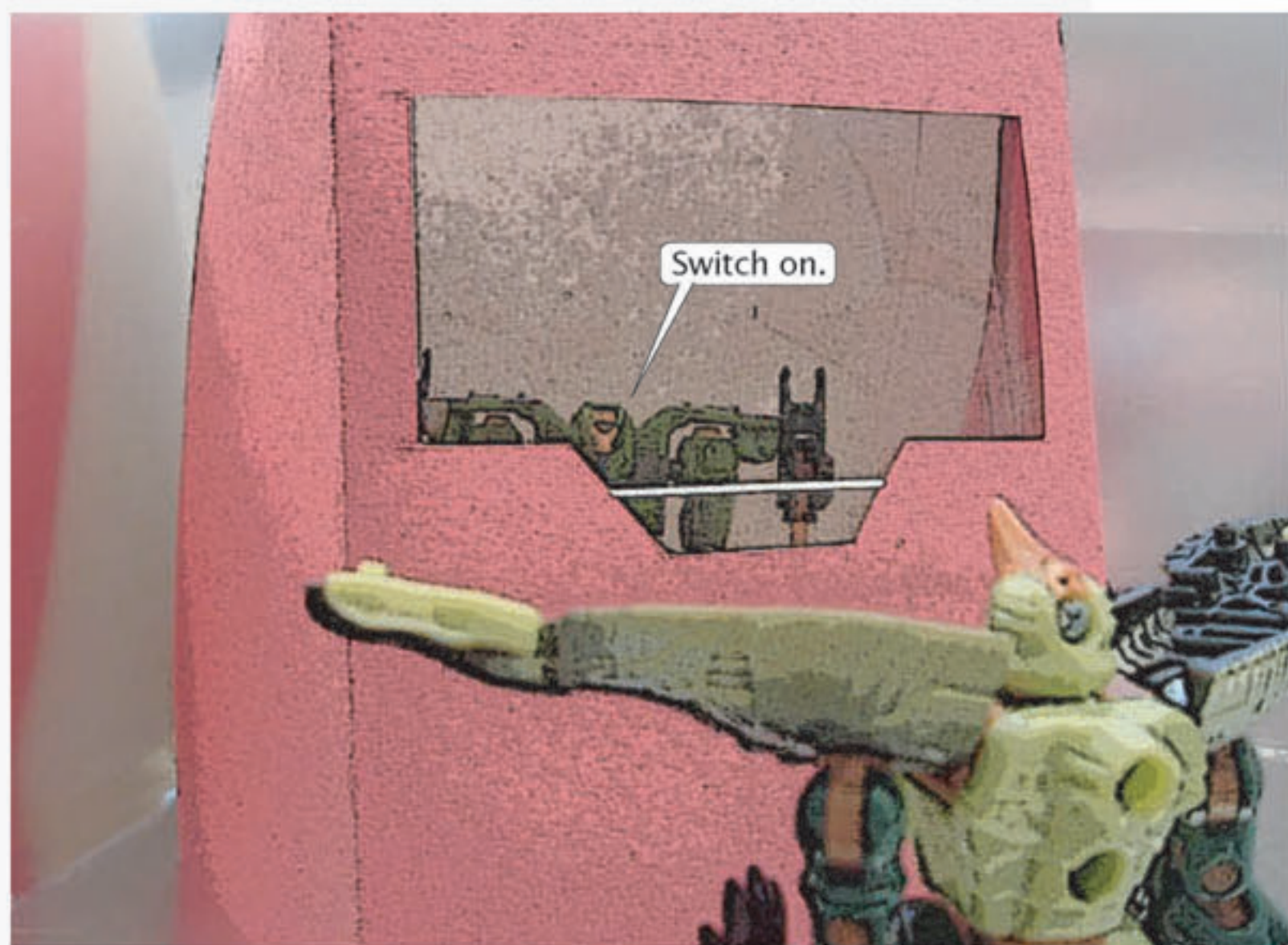
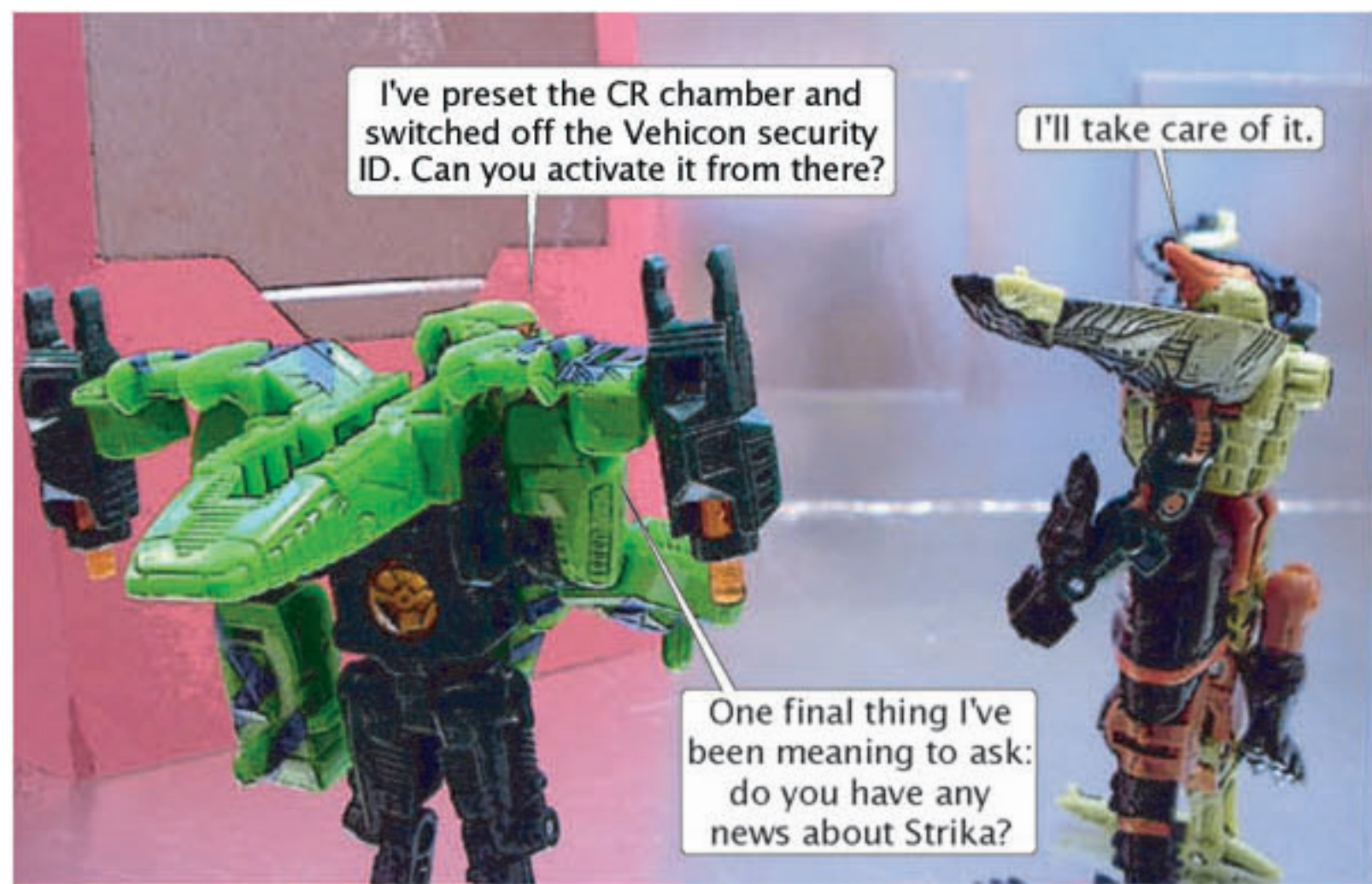




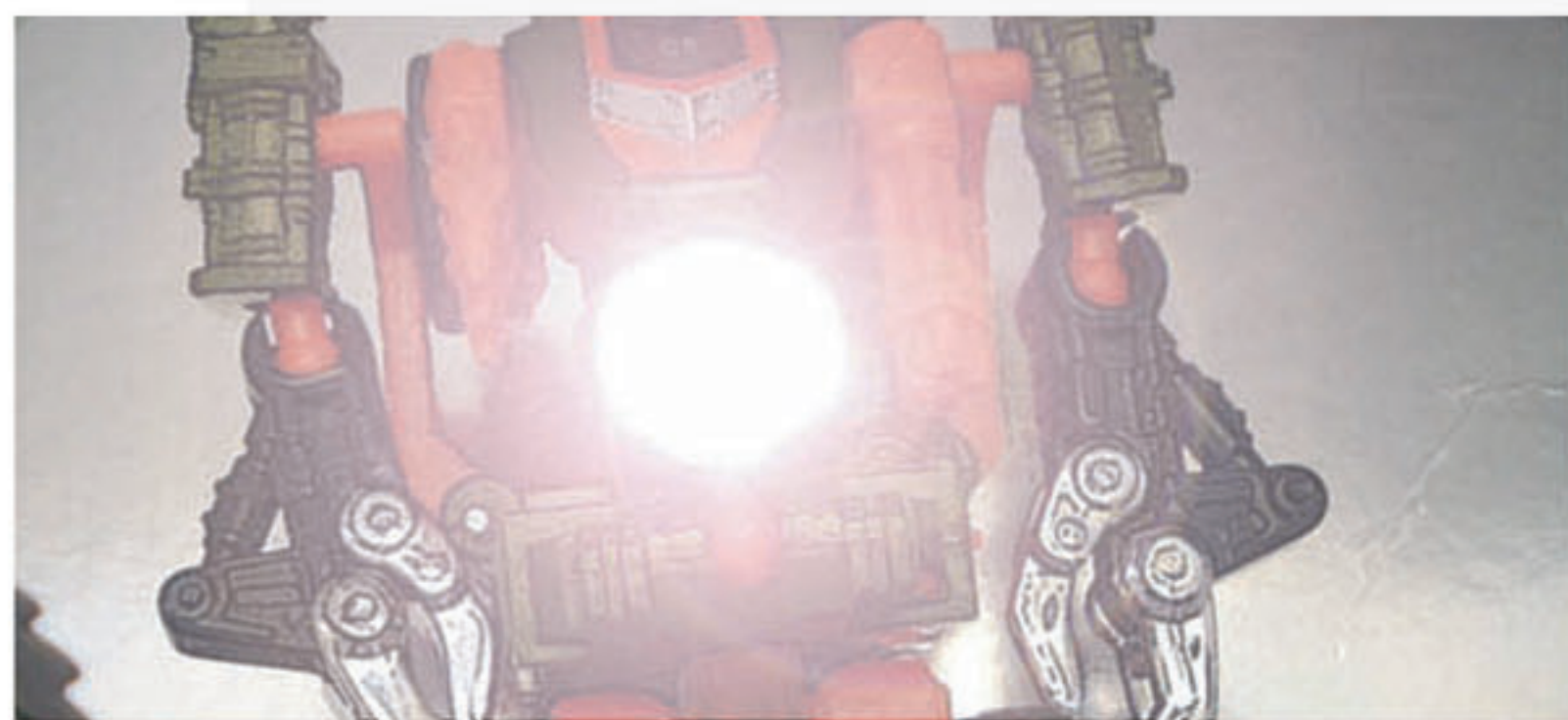
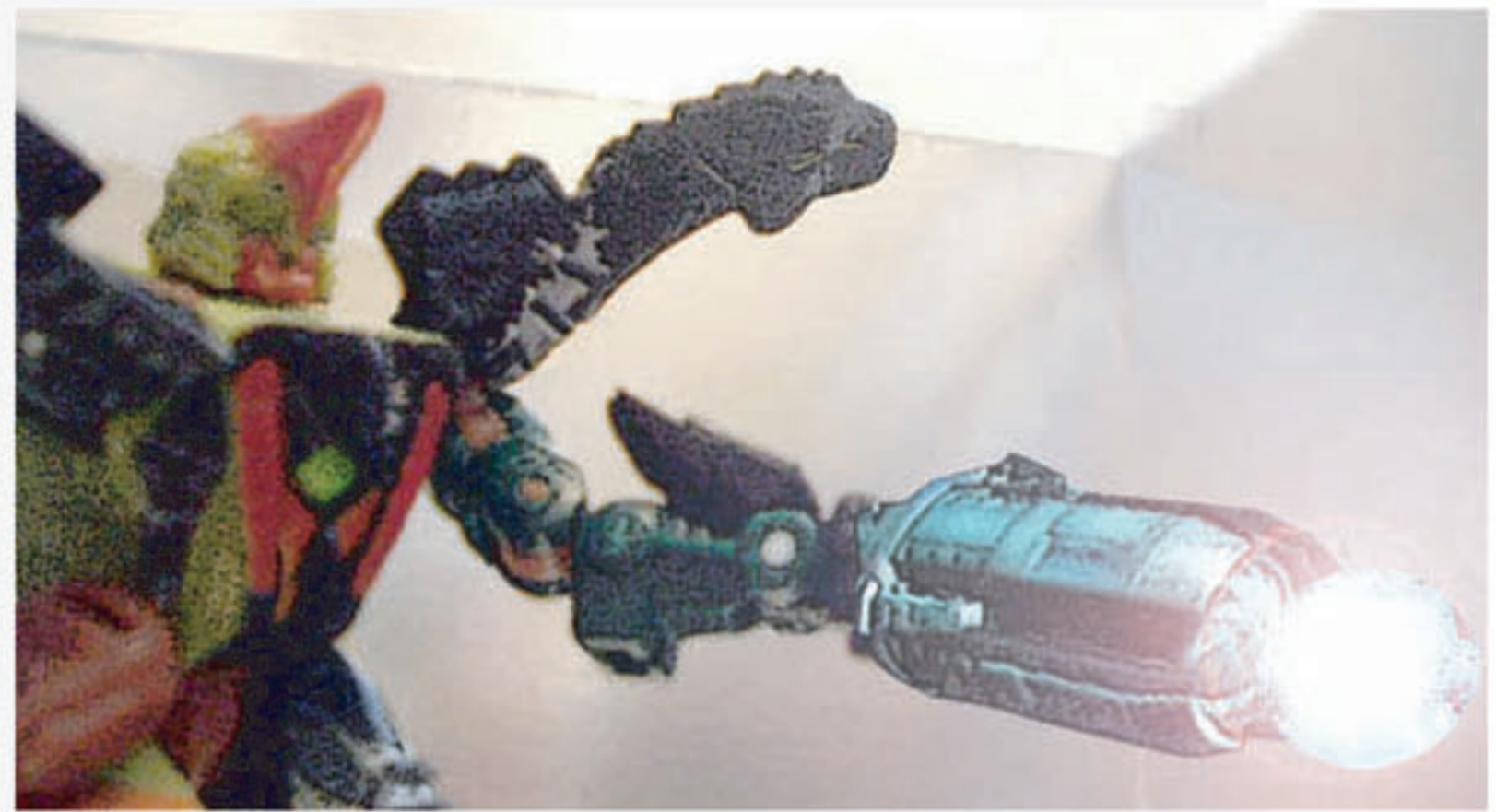
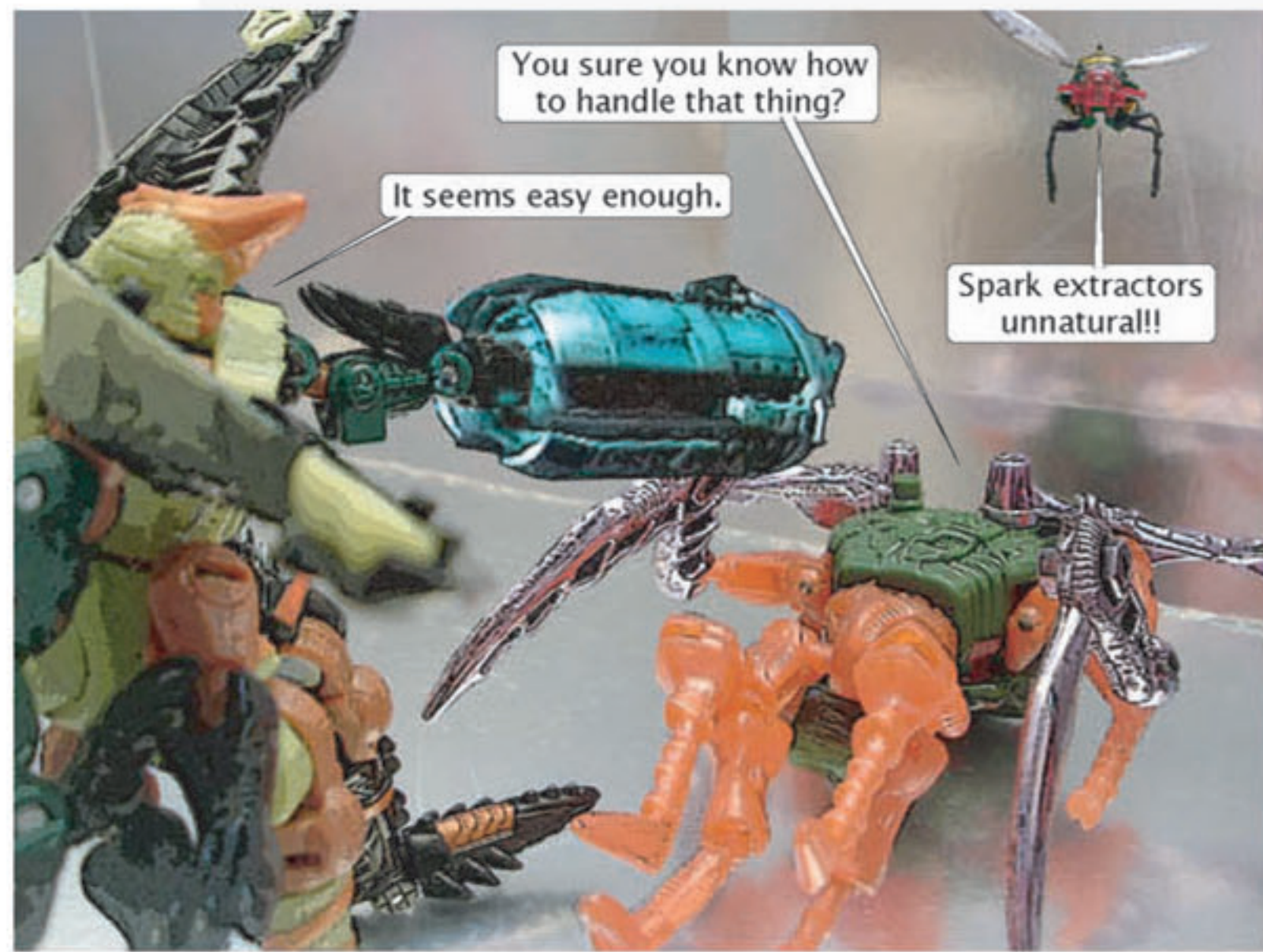




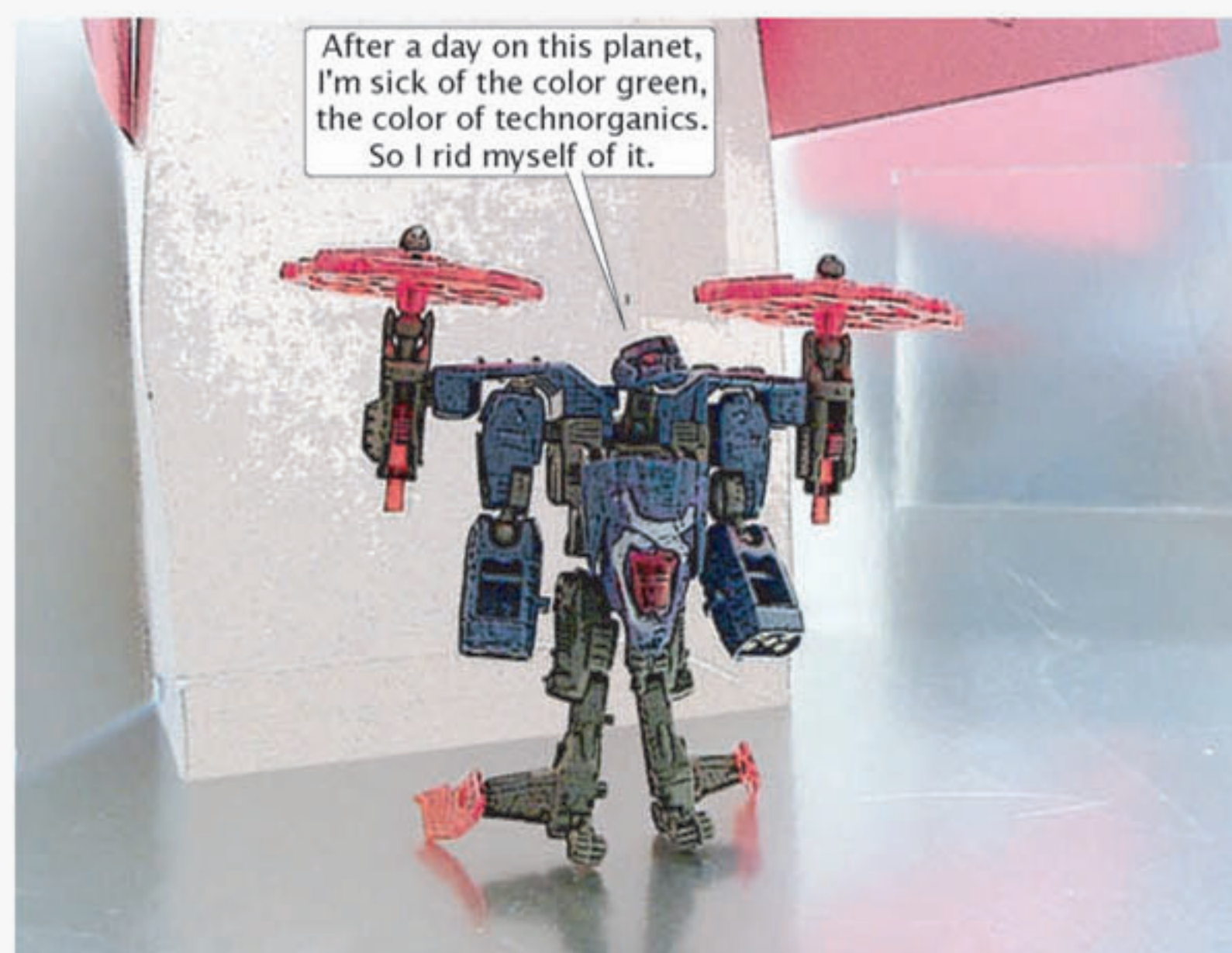






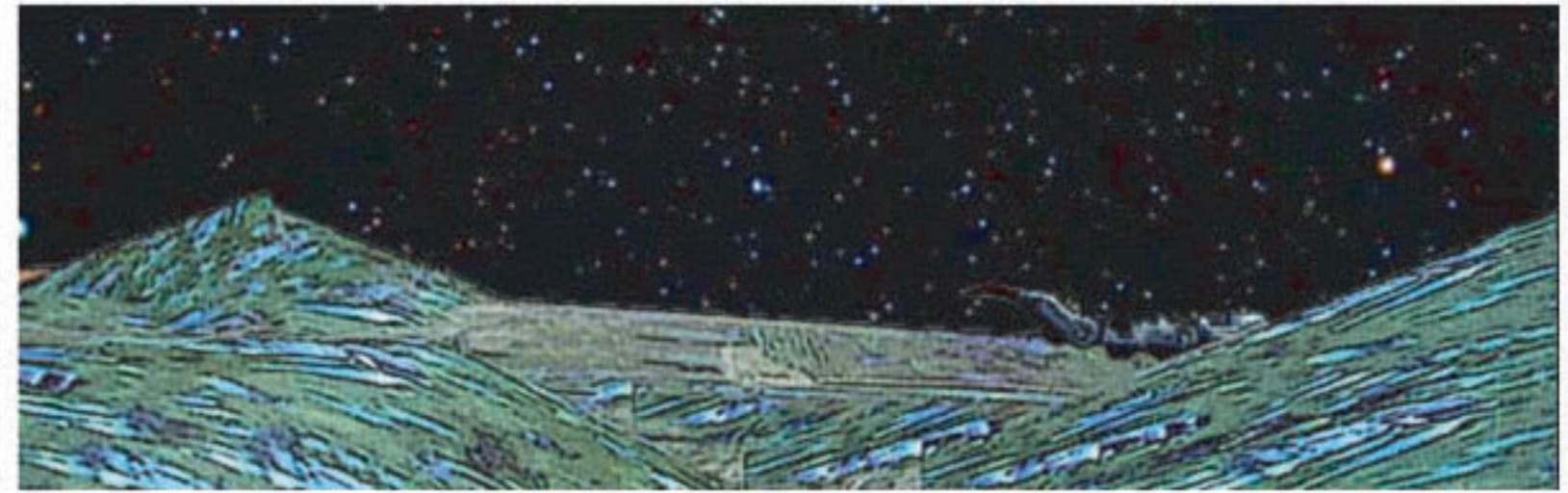




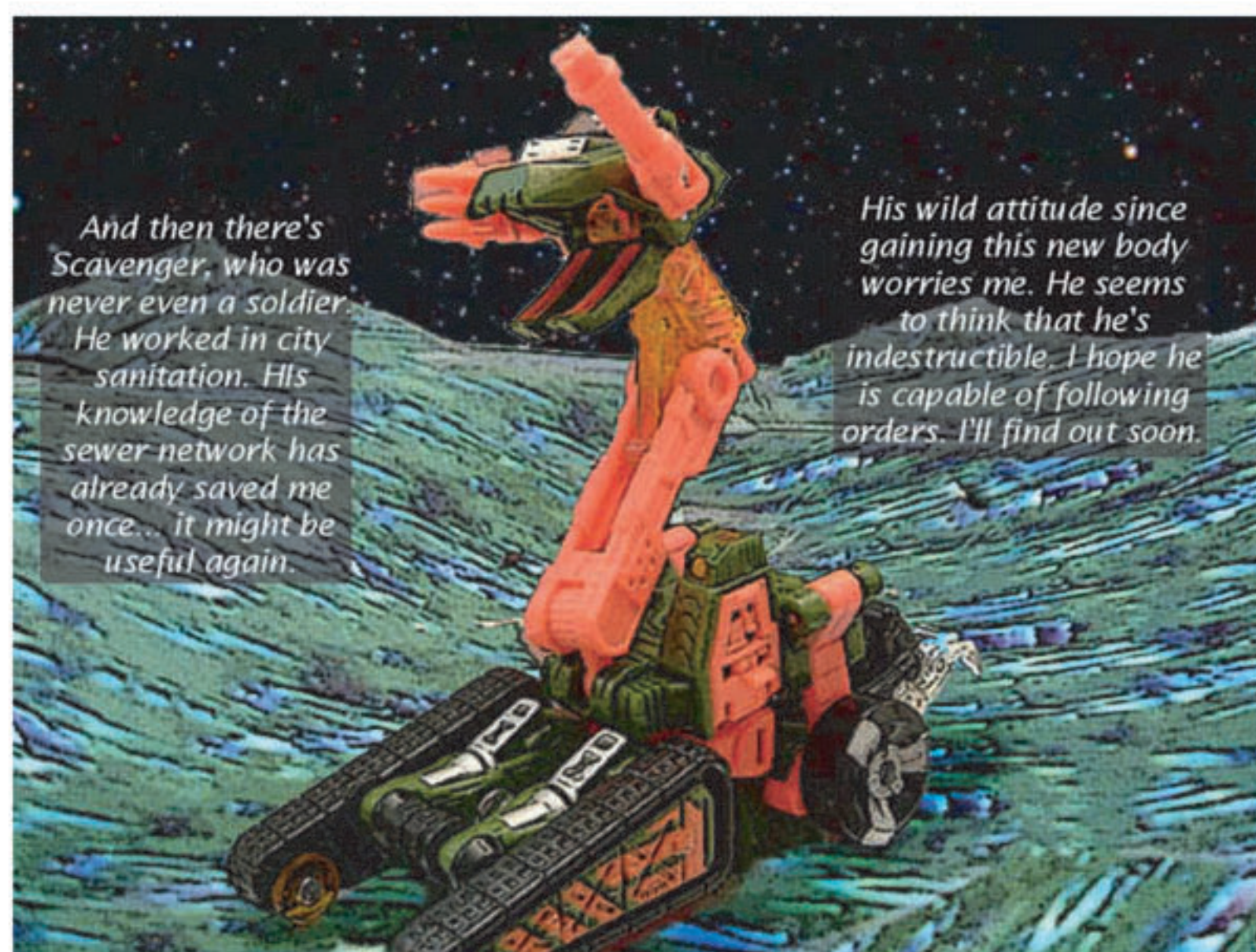
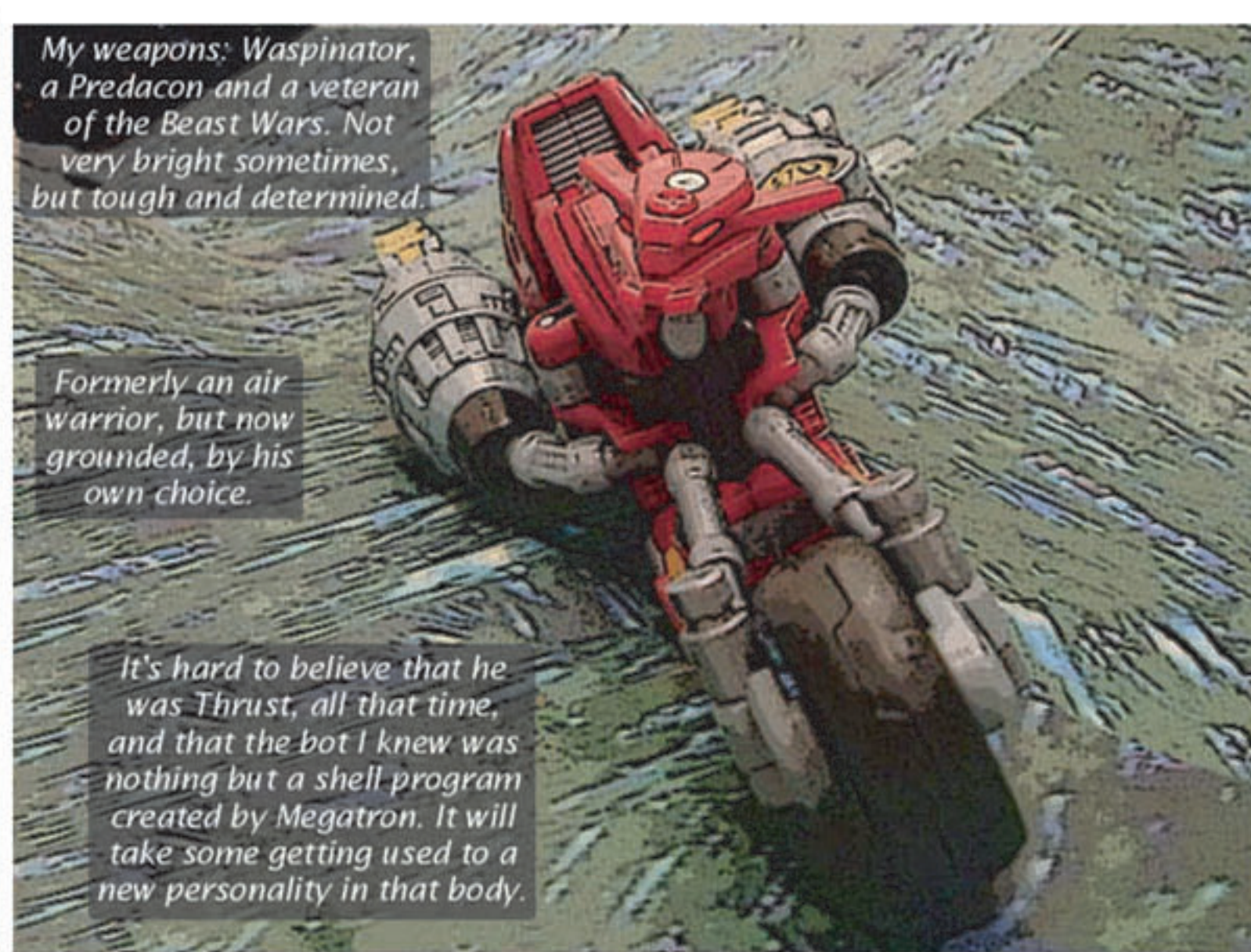
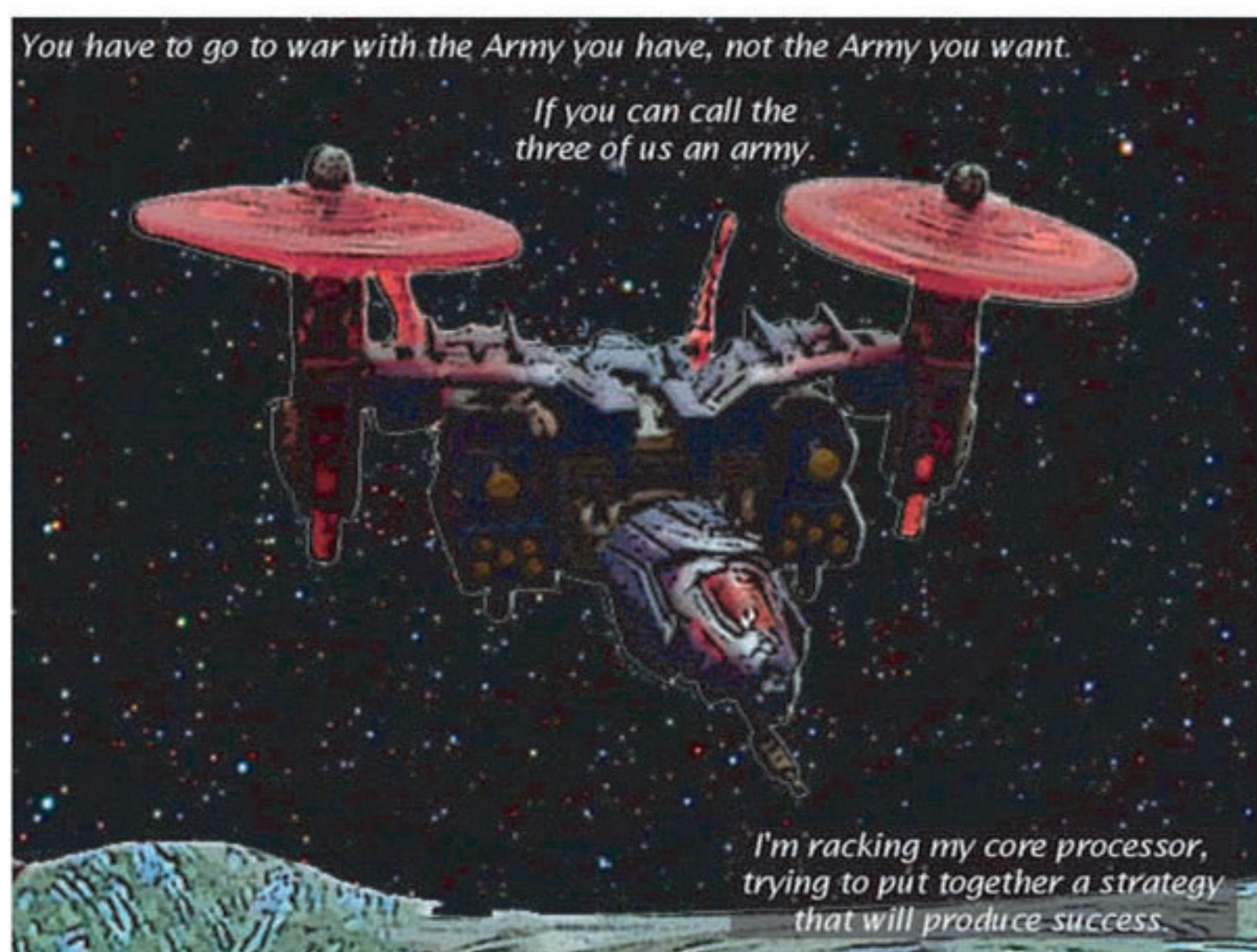
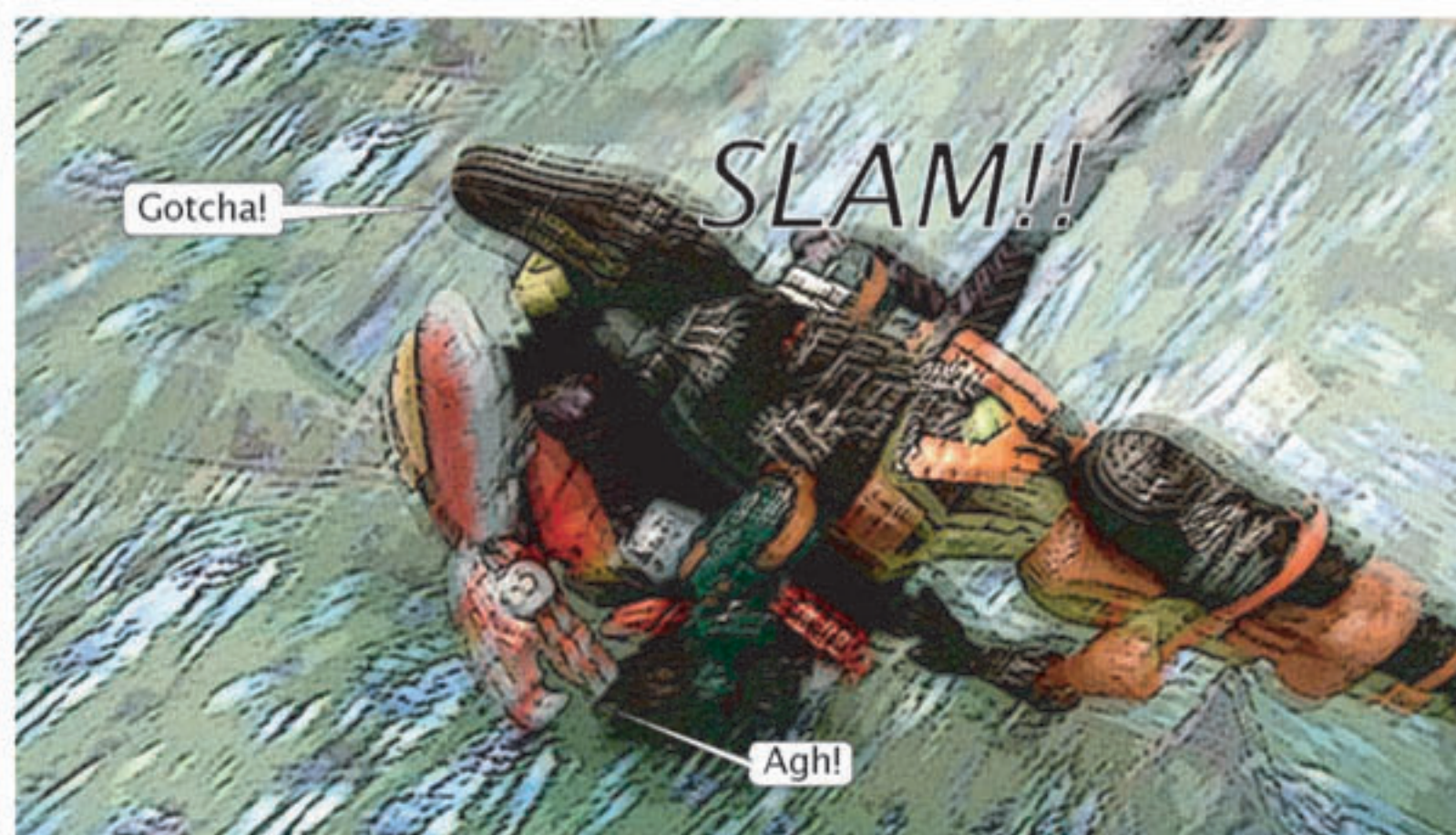
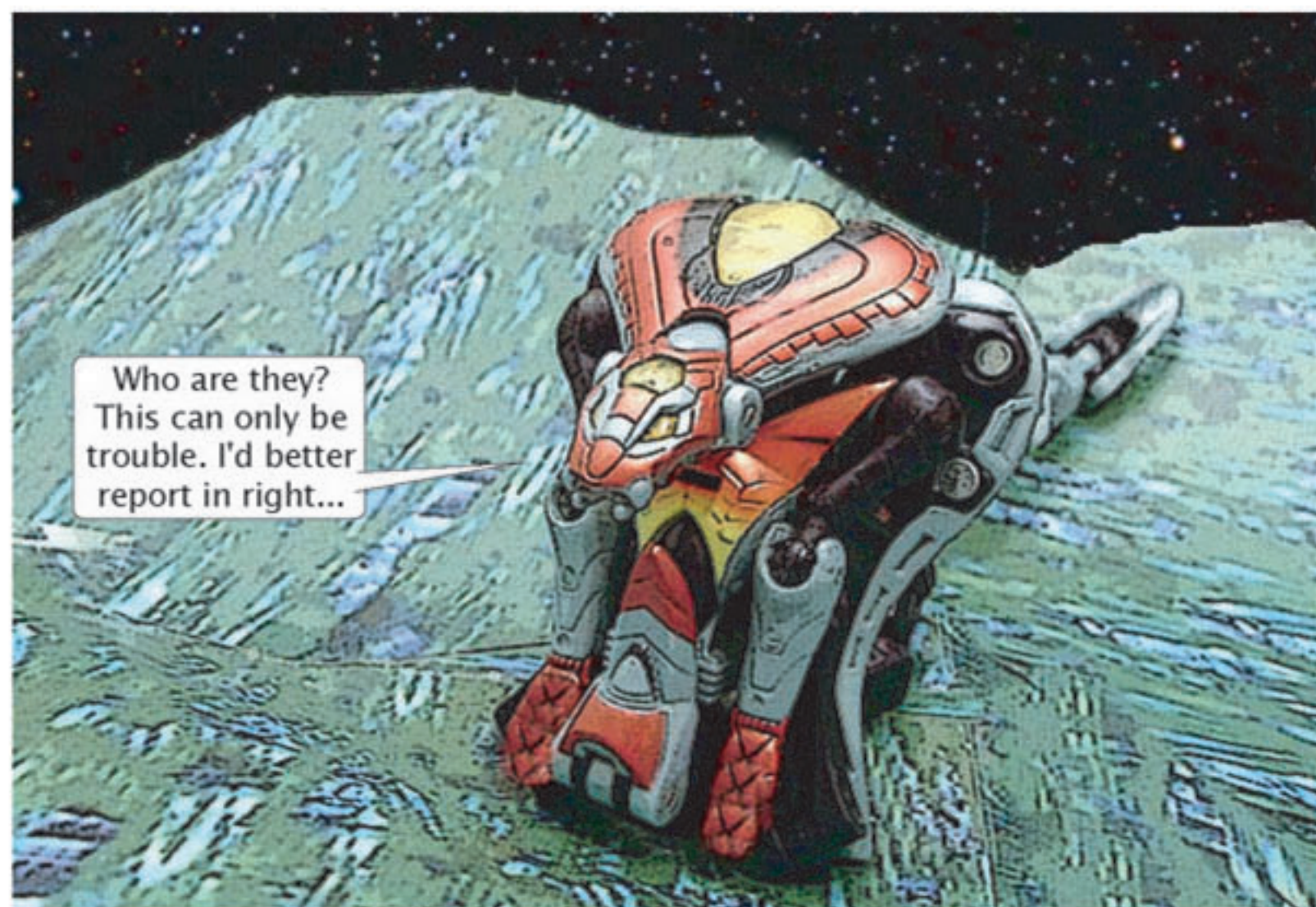




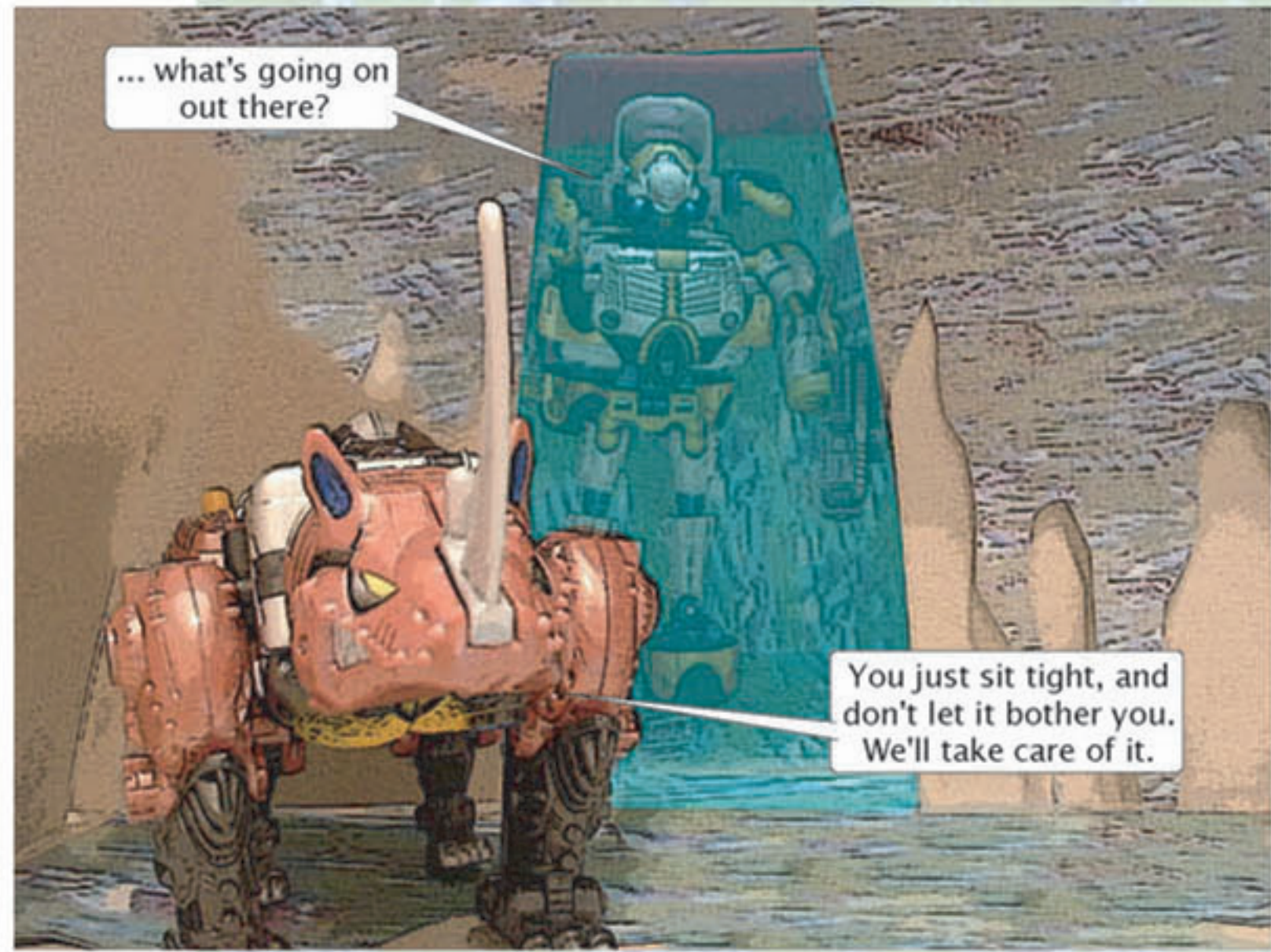
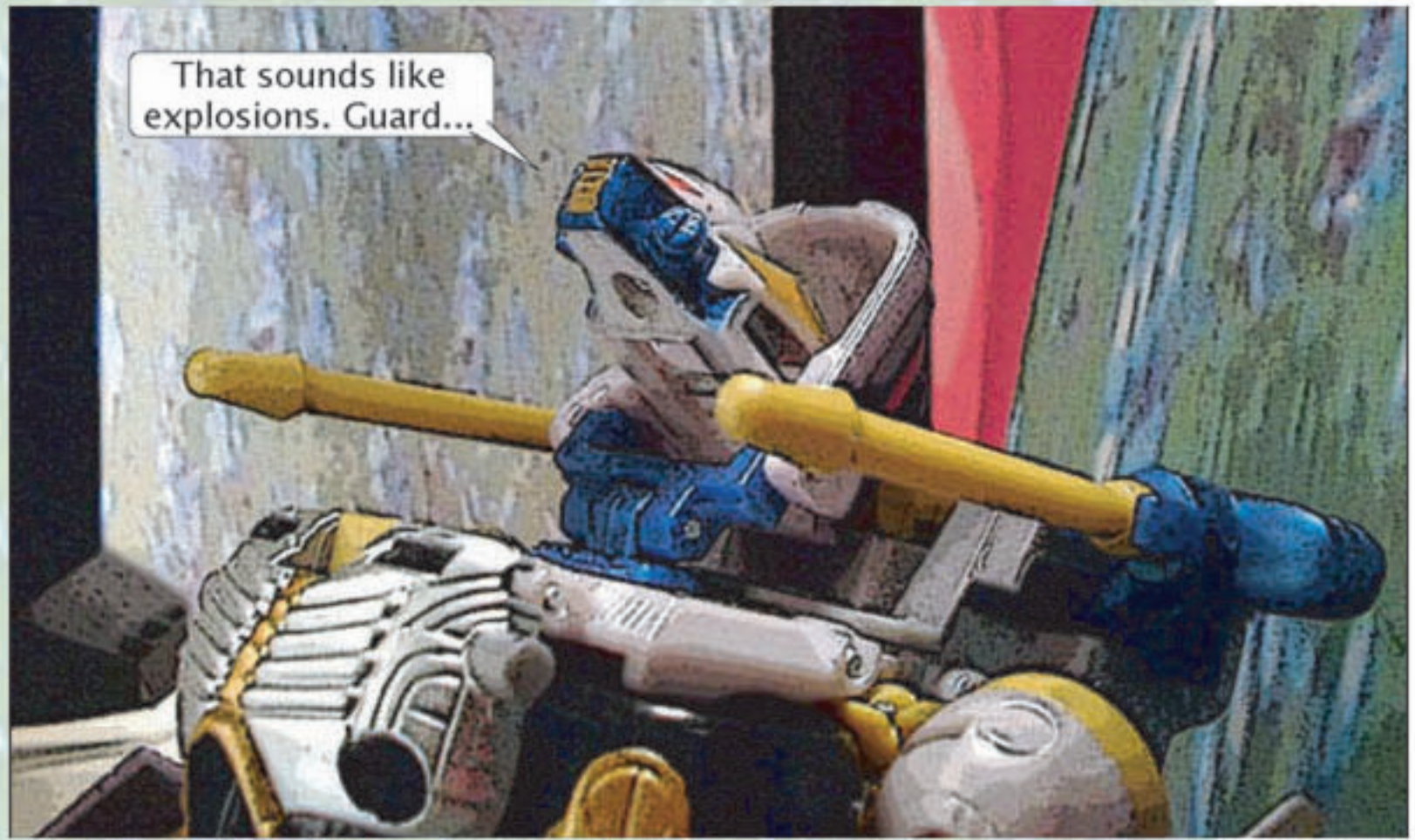
# LIBERATION



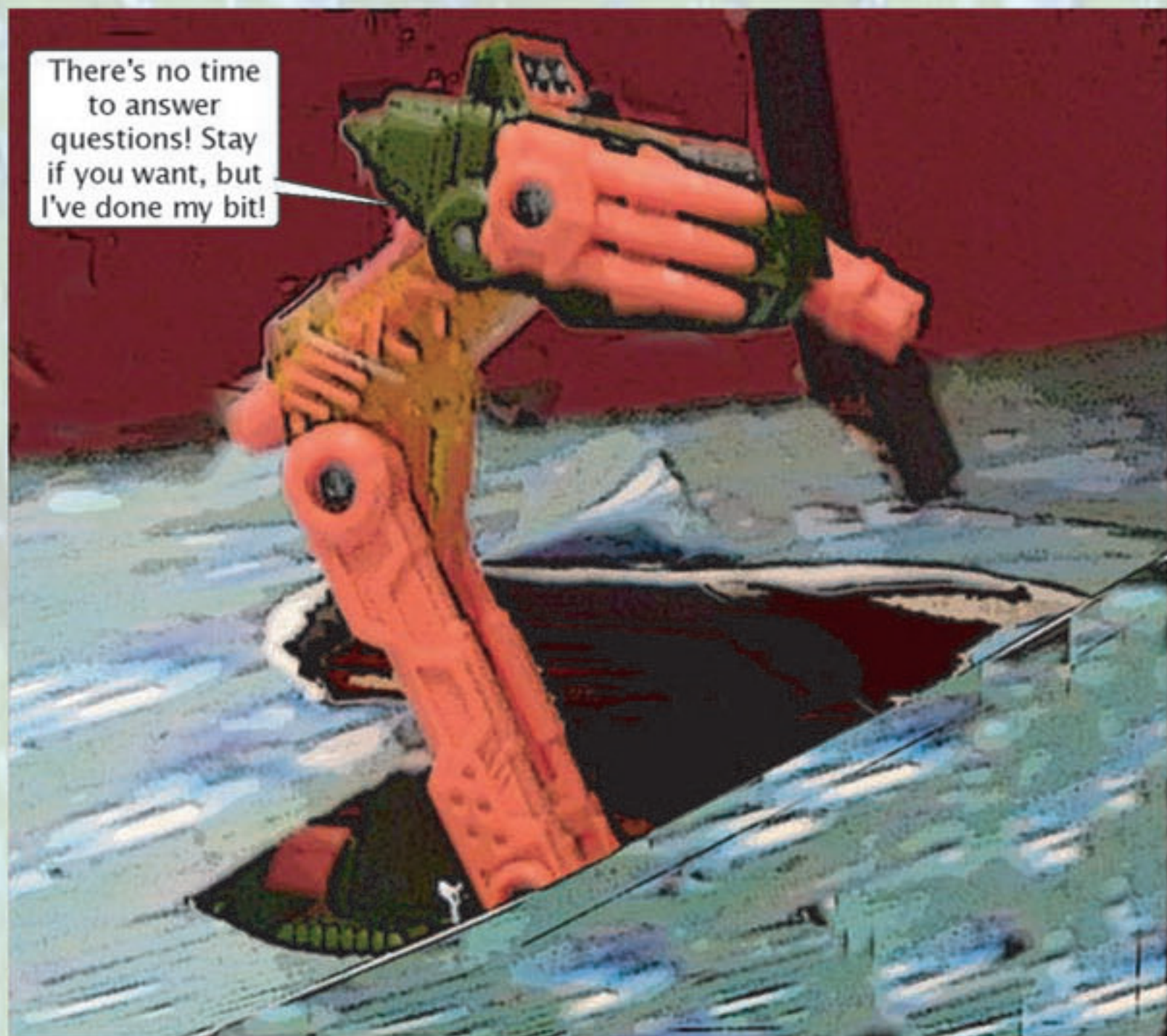




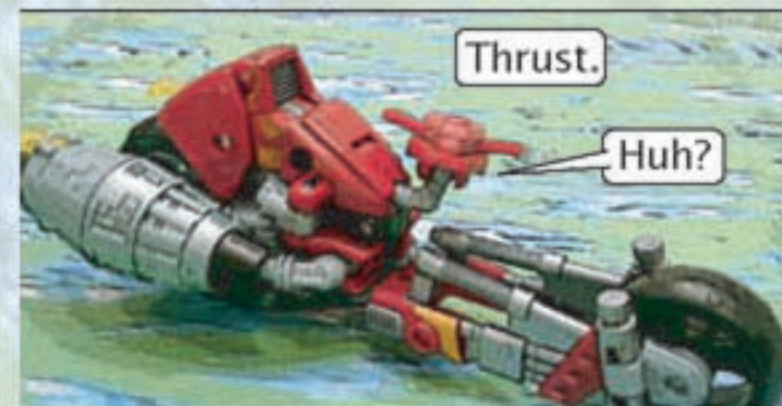
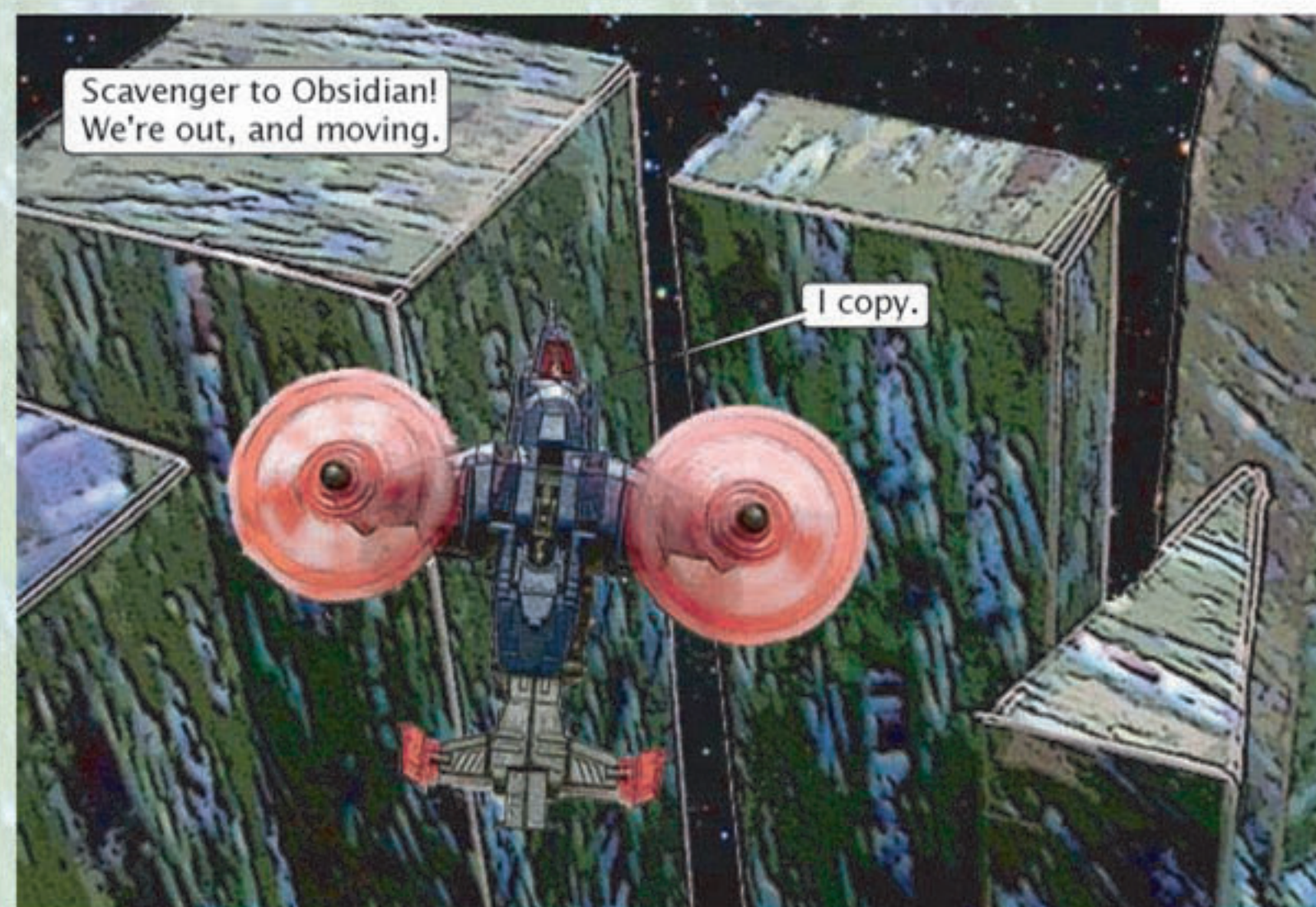
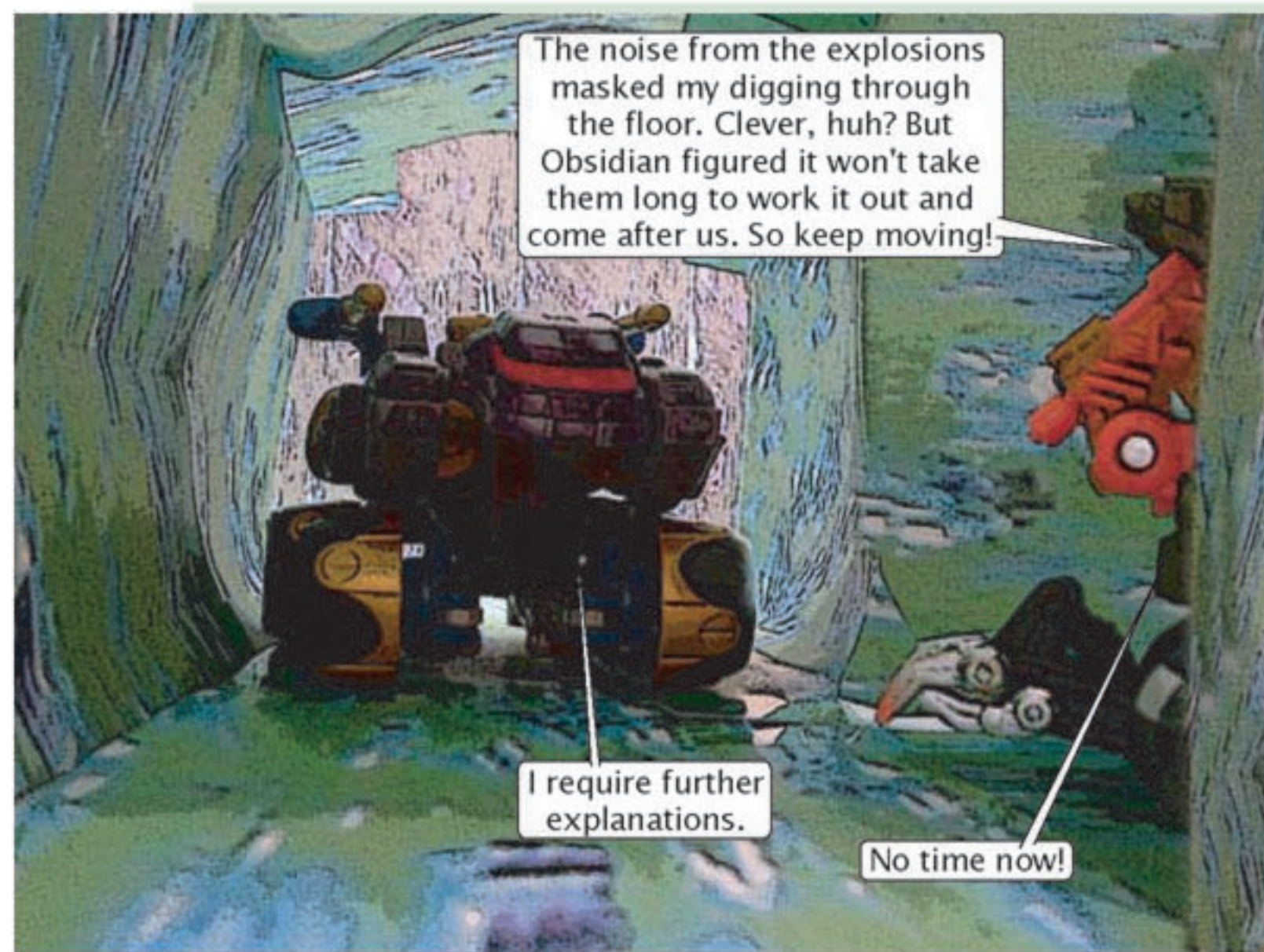




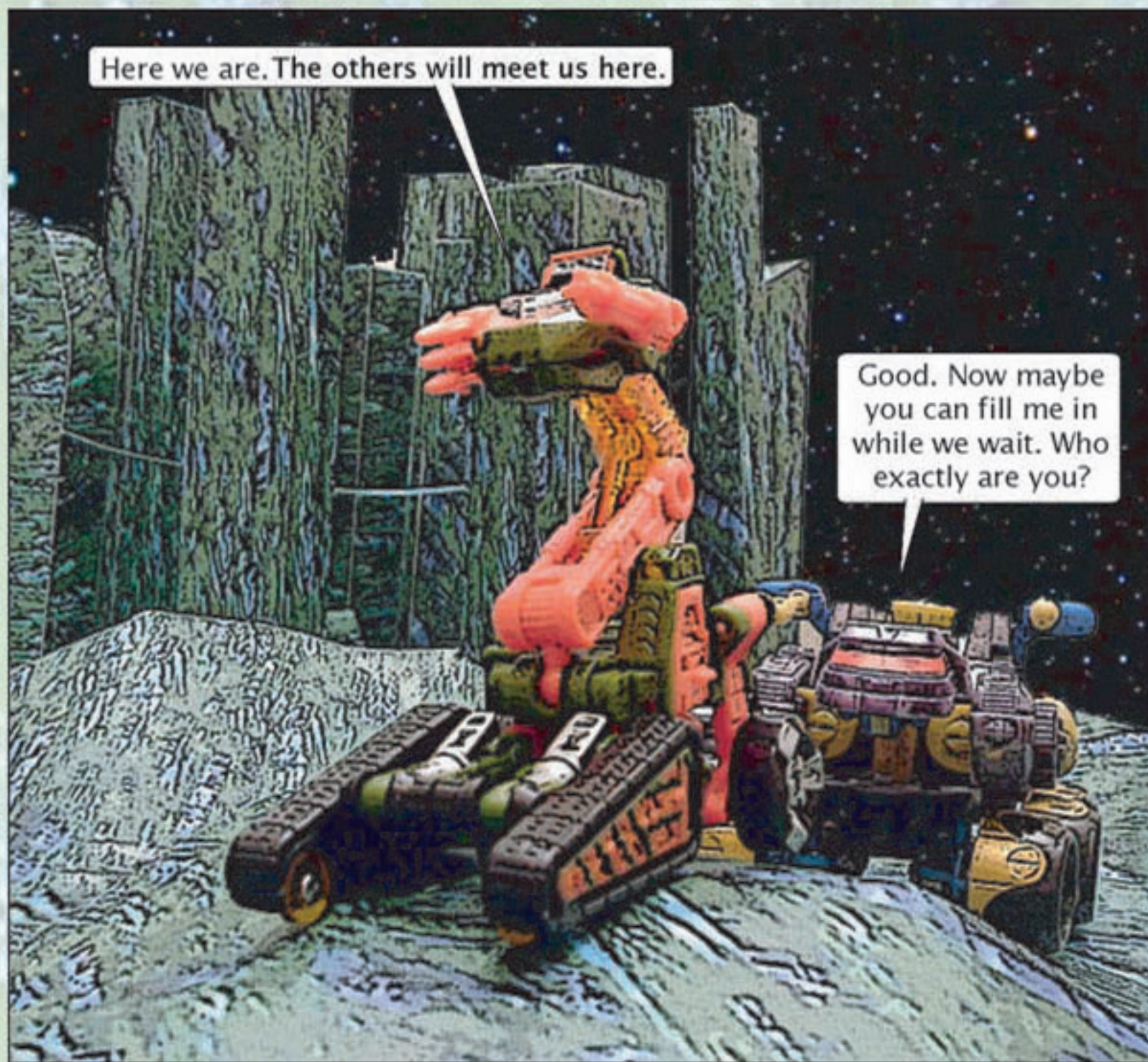




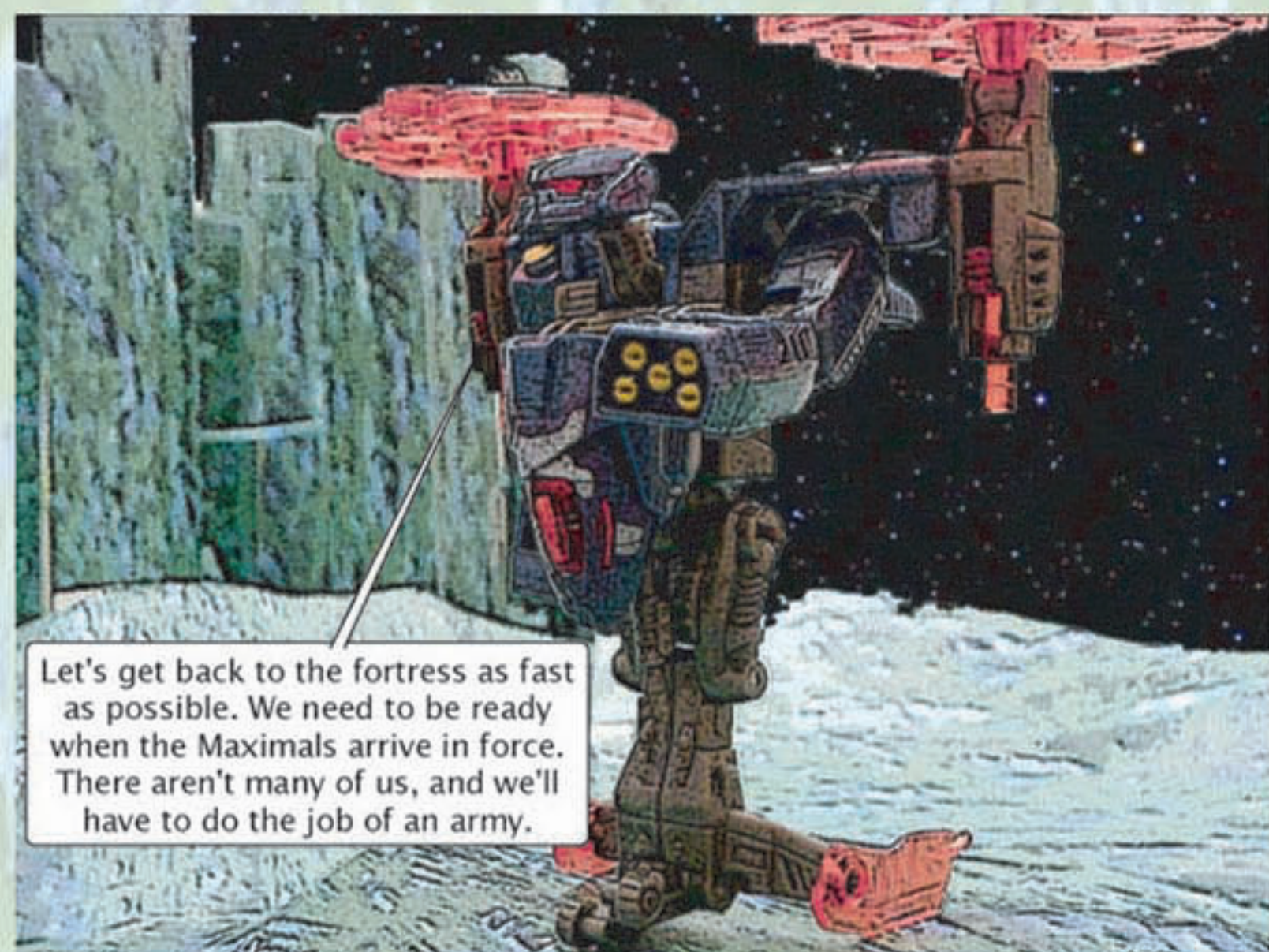
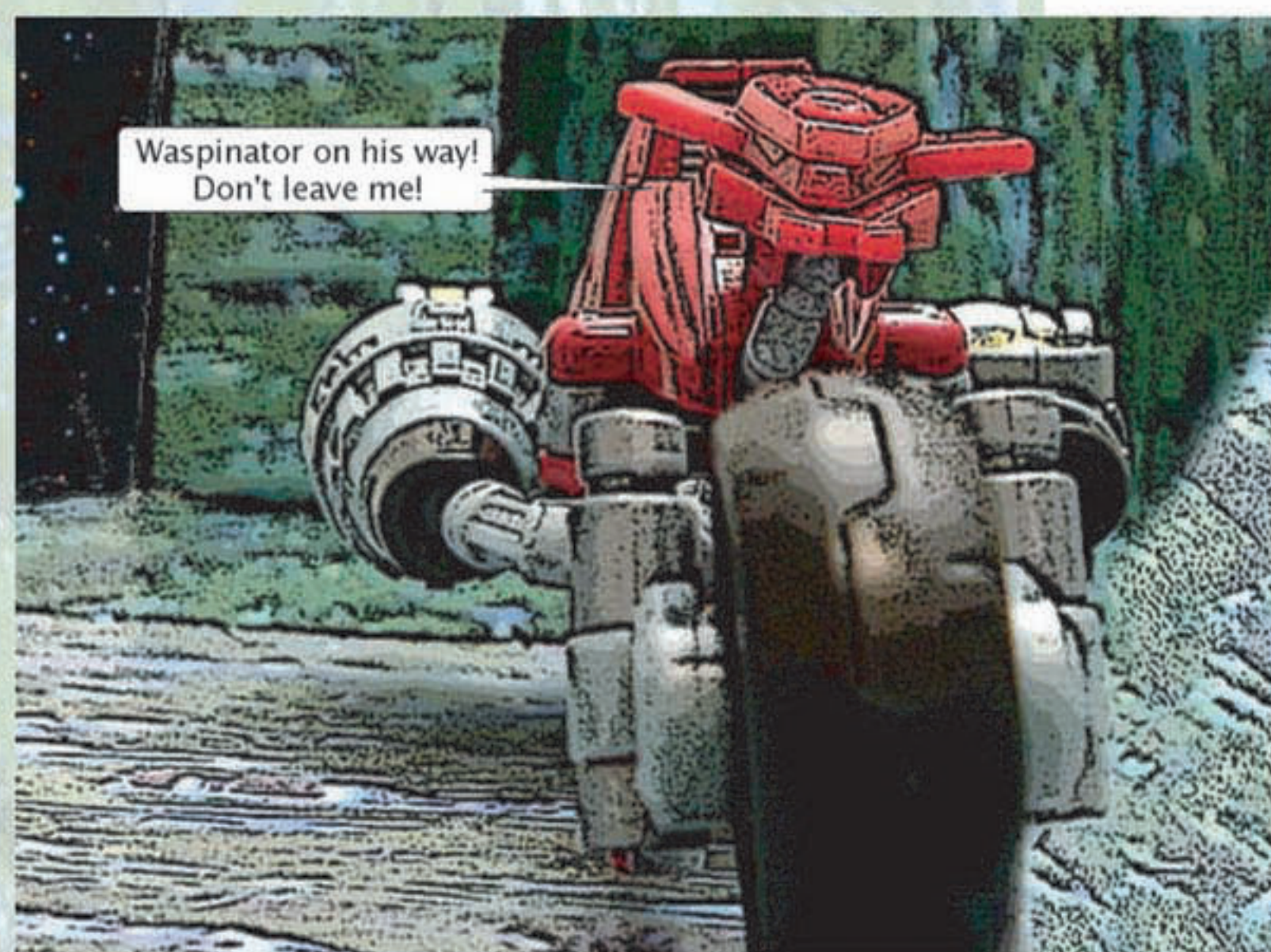
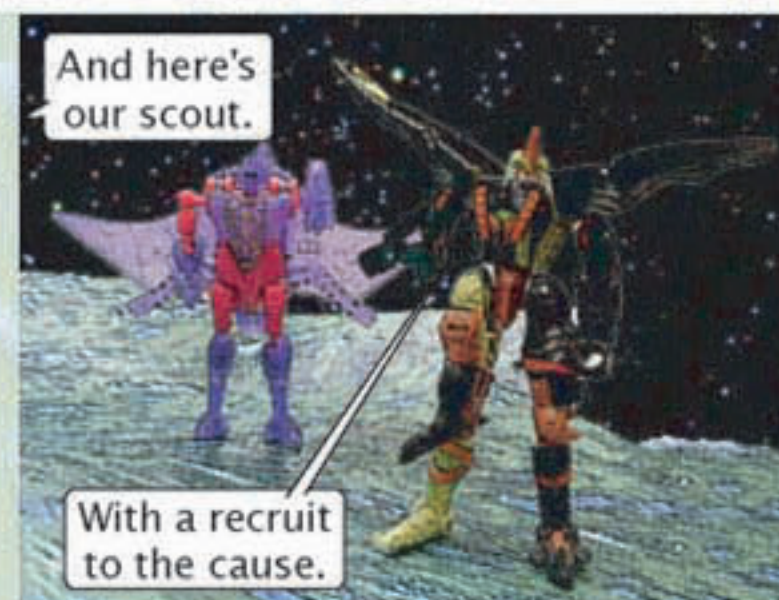
















# CONFLAGRATION



It's time to organize the forces I have to carry out my strategy, before the Maximals arrive.



I take the time to check on Spy Streak, newly transferred to a Vehicon body. He seems happy with the results.



I've assigned him lookout duty on the western side of the fortress.

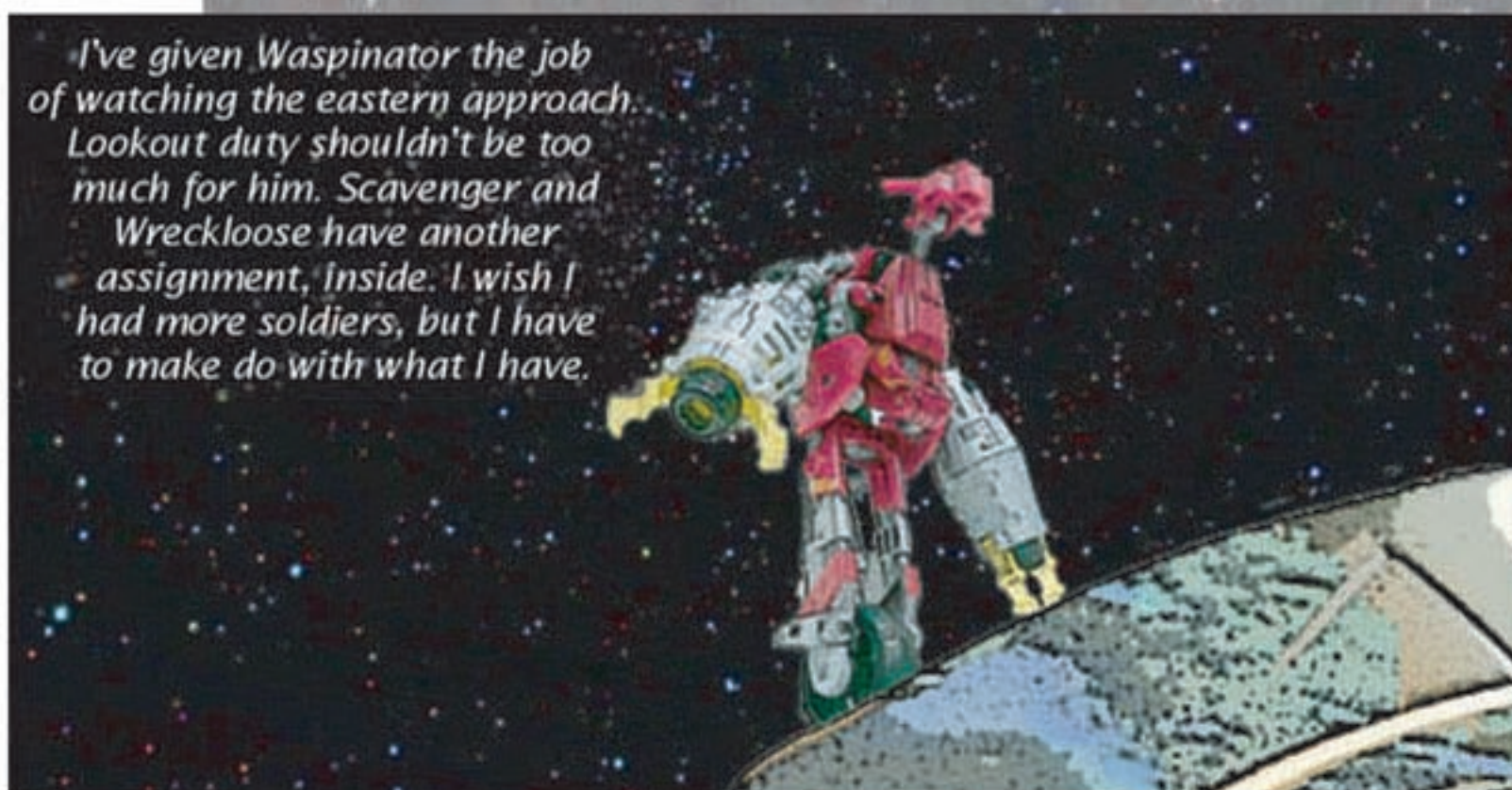
Are you doing alright?

I'm fine. Just takes a little getting used to.



You'll do fine. Just let me know if you see anyone.

I've given Waspinator the job of watching the eastern approach. Lookout duty shouldn't be too much for him. Scavenger and Wreckloose have another assignment, inside. I wish I had more soldiers, but I have to make do with what I have.



Strika is watching the main entrance to the fortress, the one facing Cybertronopolis. I expect any pursuit force to come from that direction. She's by far the most capable soldier here, other than myself.



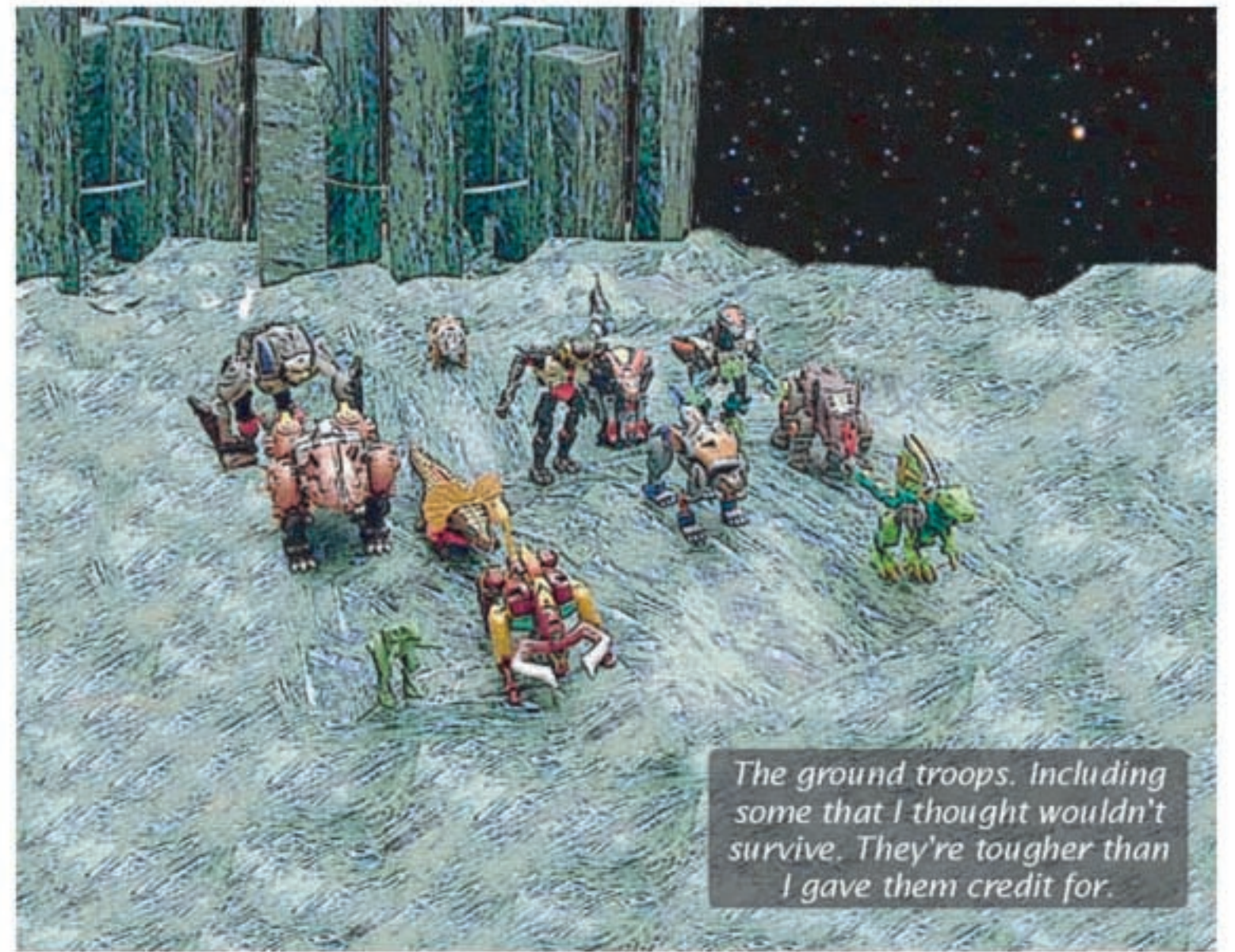
Obsidian! The Maximal militia is approaching.

That was quick. I knew she'd be the first to sound the alarm.

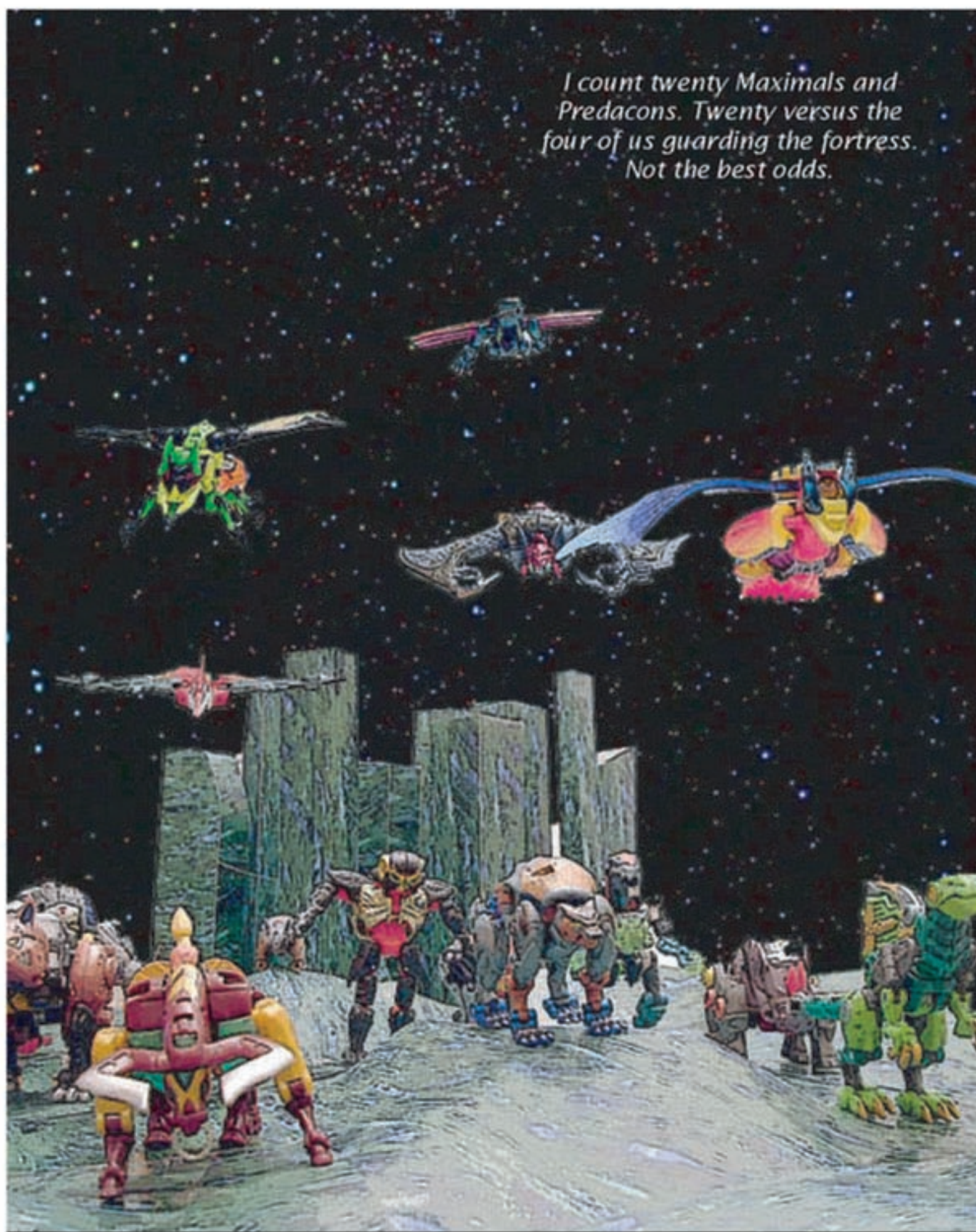




Here they come.



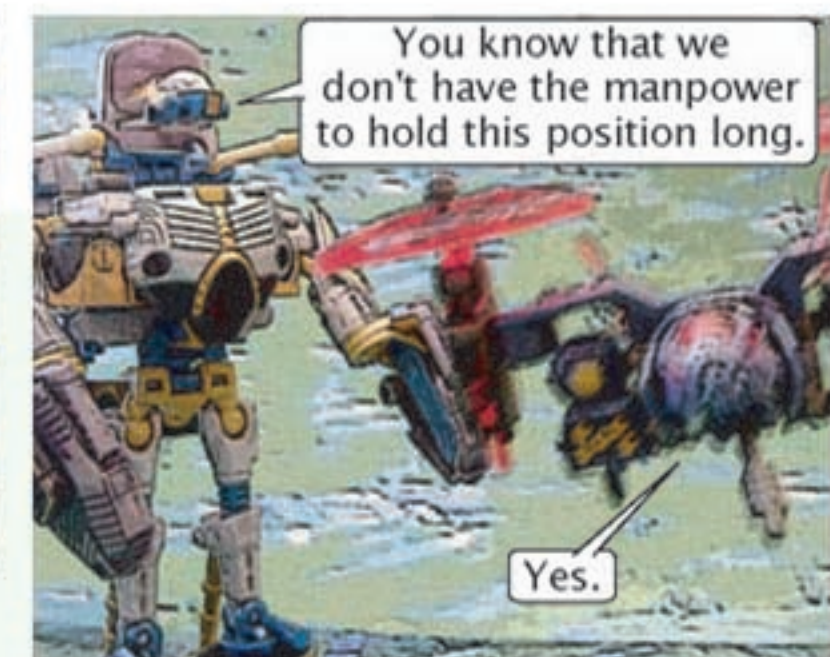
The ground troops. Including some that I thought wouldn't survive. They're tougher than I gave them credit for.



I count twenty Maximals and Predacons. Twenty versus the four of us guarding the fortress. Not the best odds.



I don't see the rat, or the bat. There's Blackarachnia though, and Cheetor. And Leo Prime! I'm surprised. I would have expected a politician like him to stay behind the scenes and talk rather than come fight.



You know that we don't have the manpower to hold this position long.

Yes.

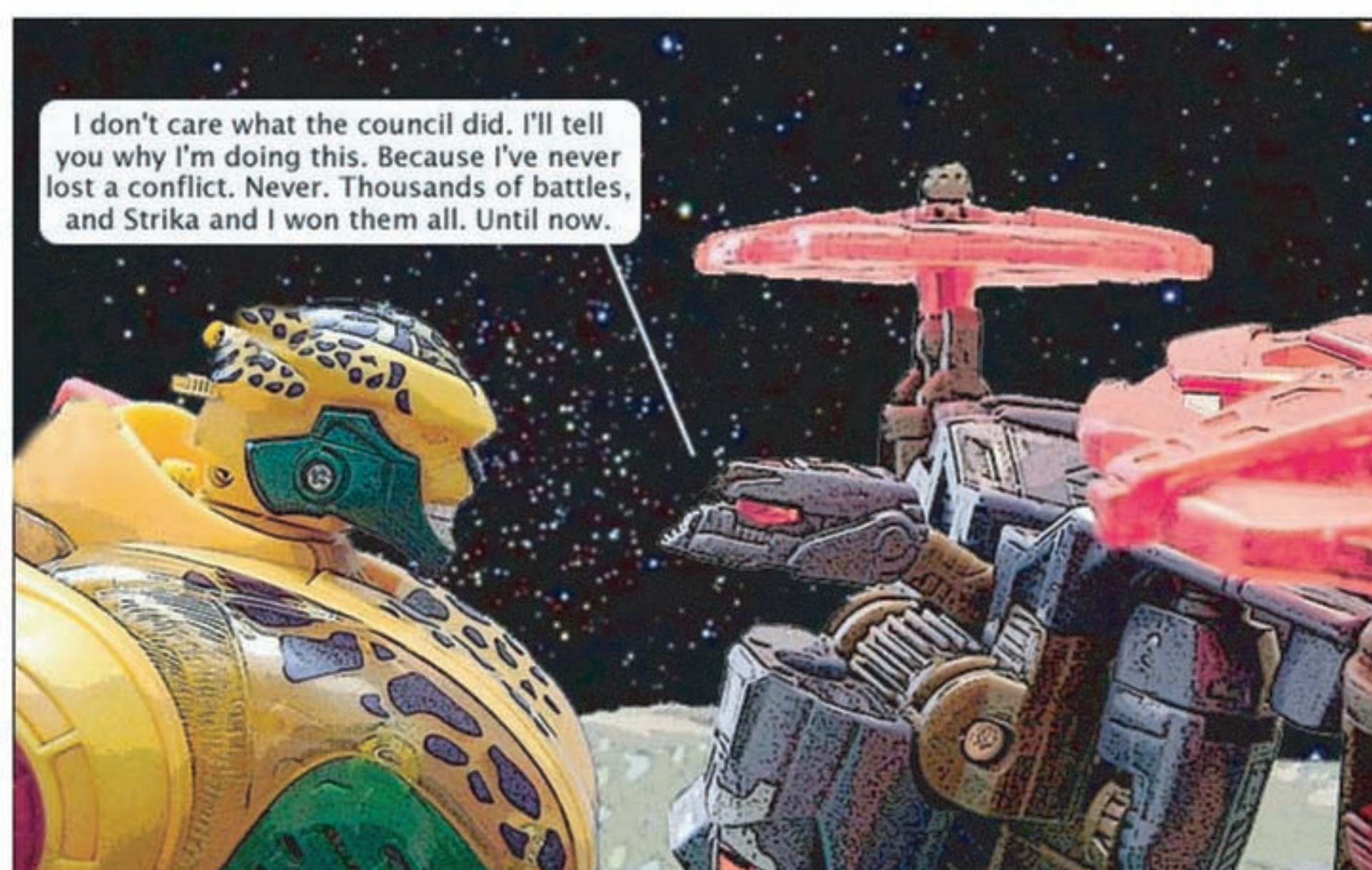
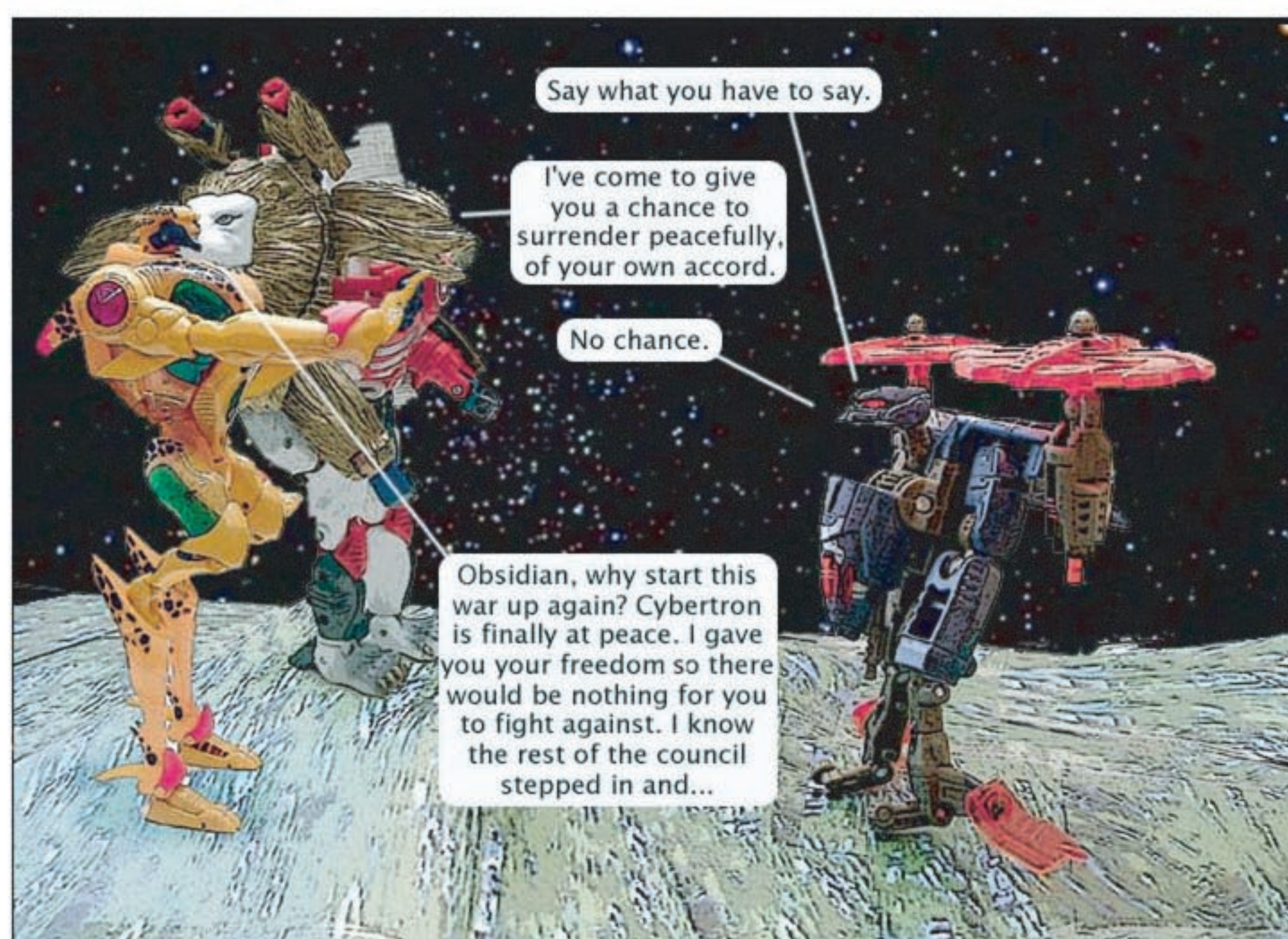
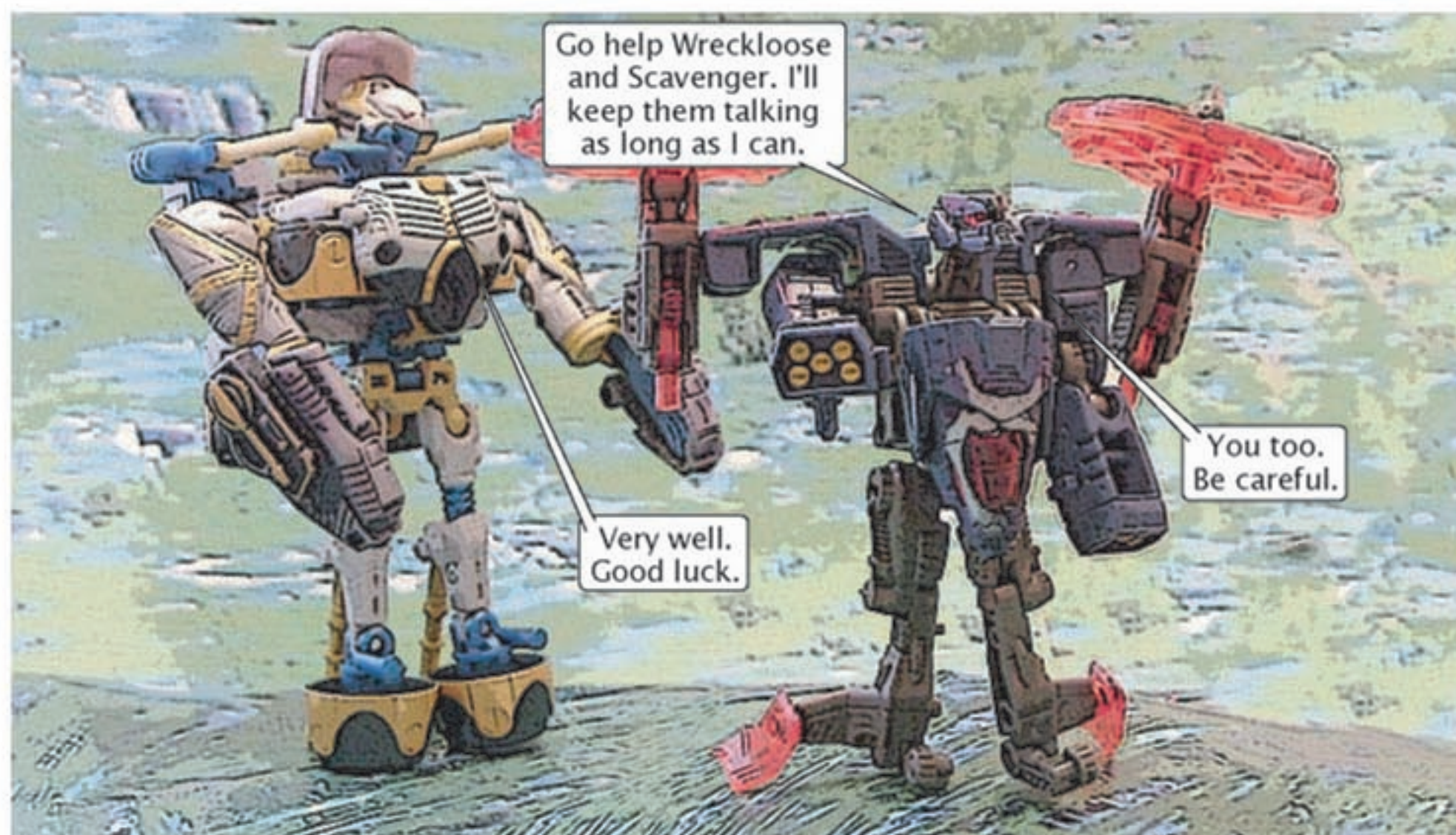


What we need is time...

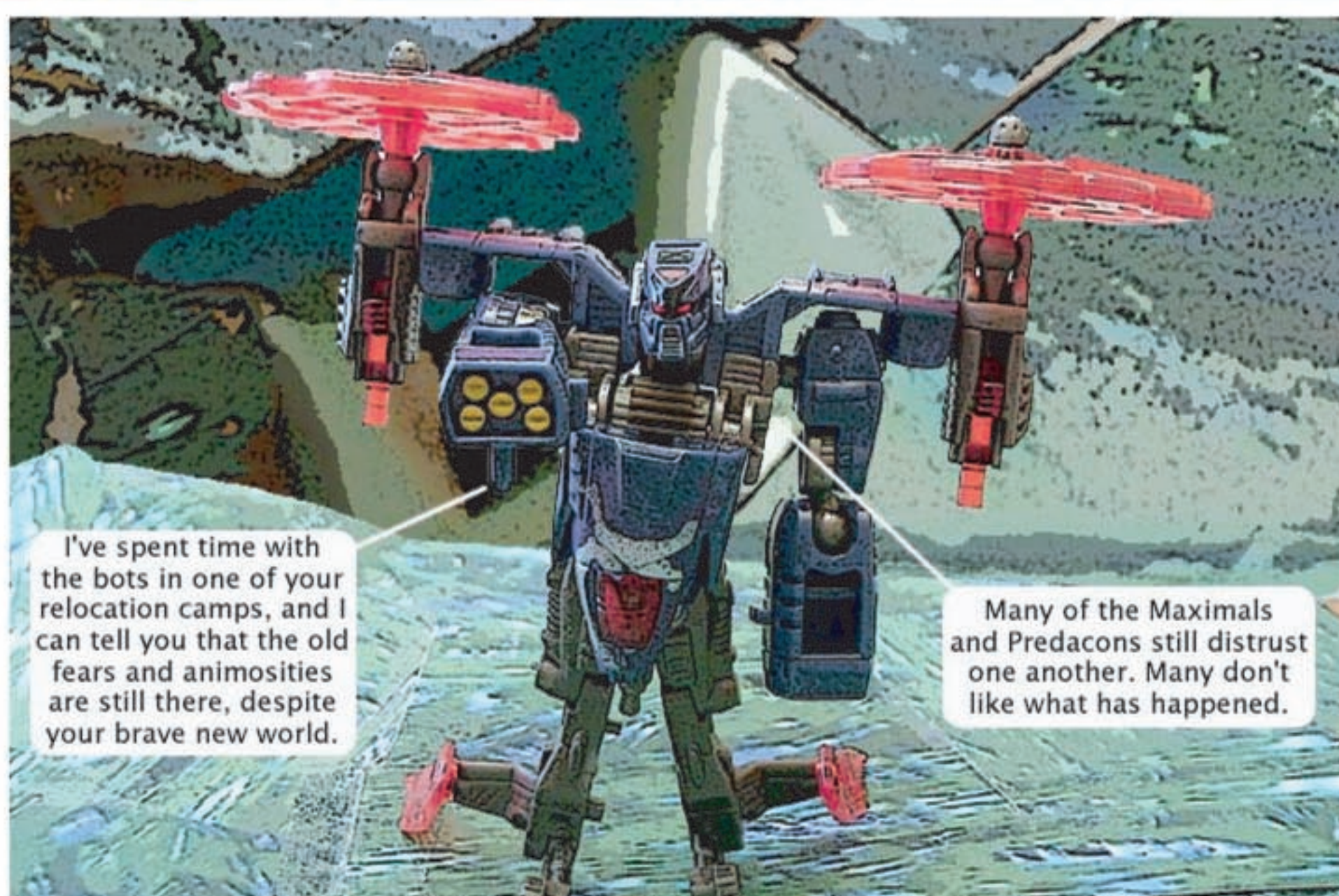
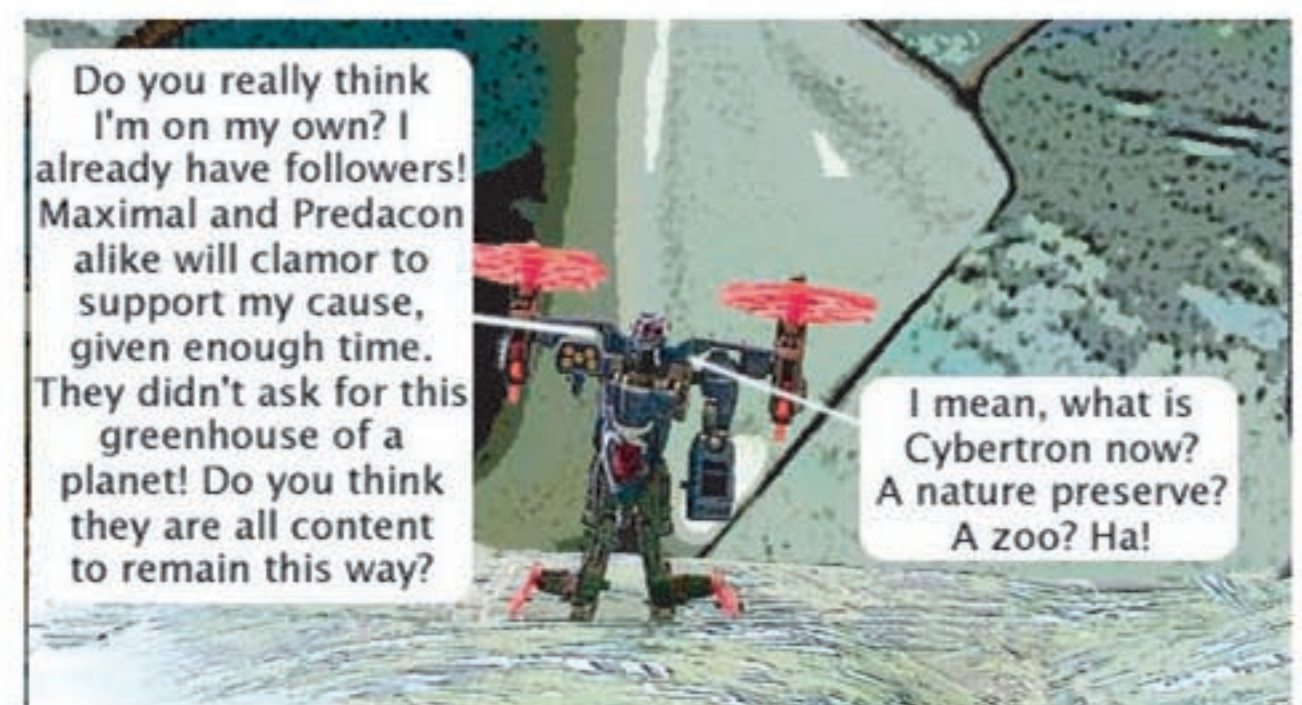
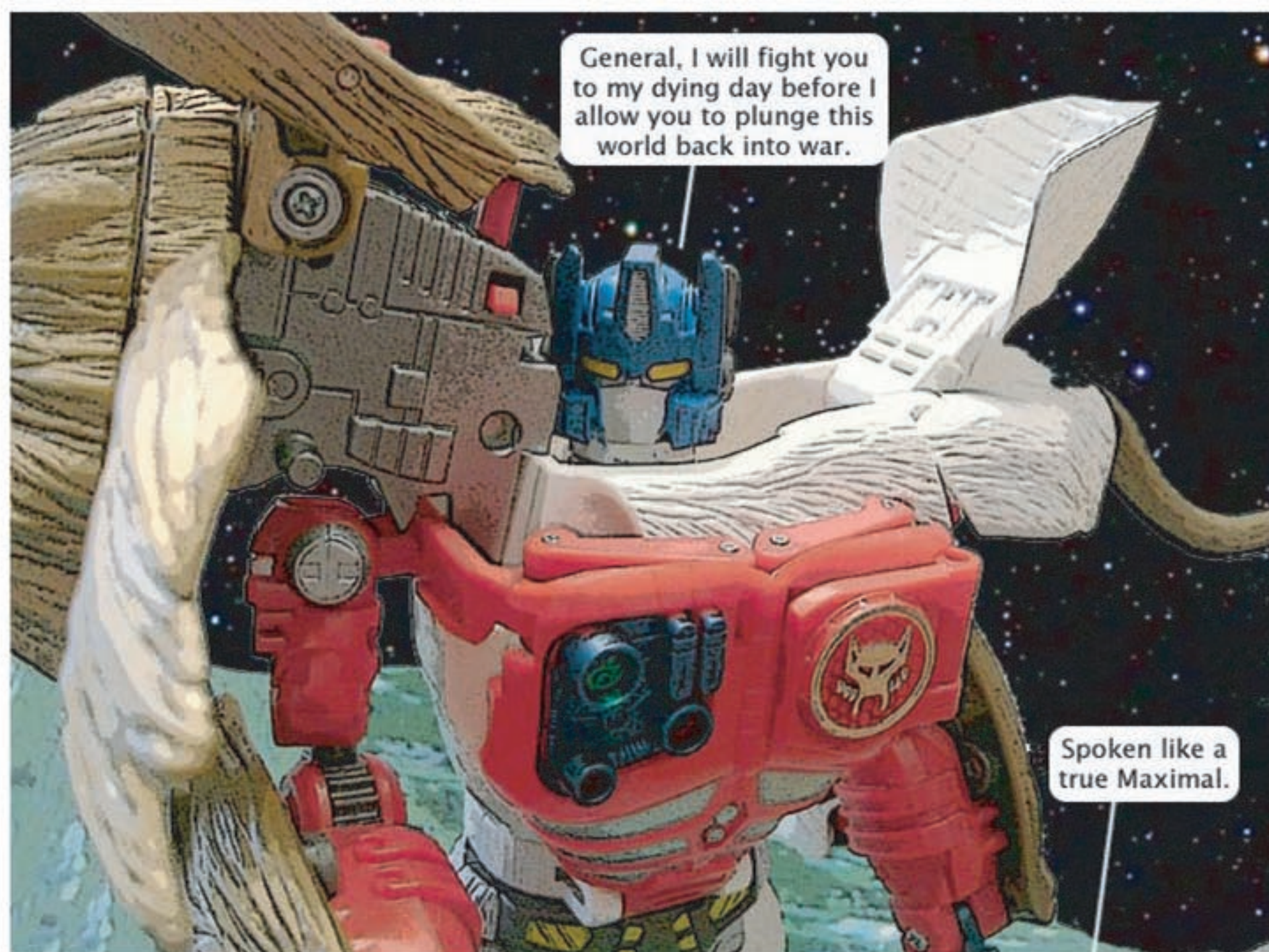
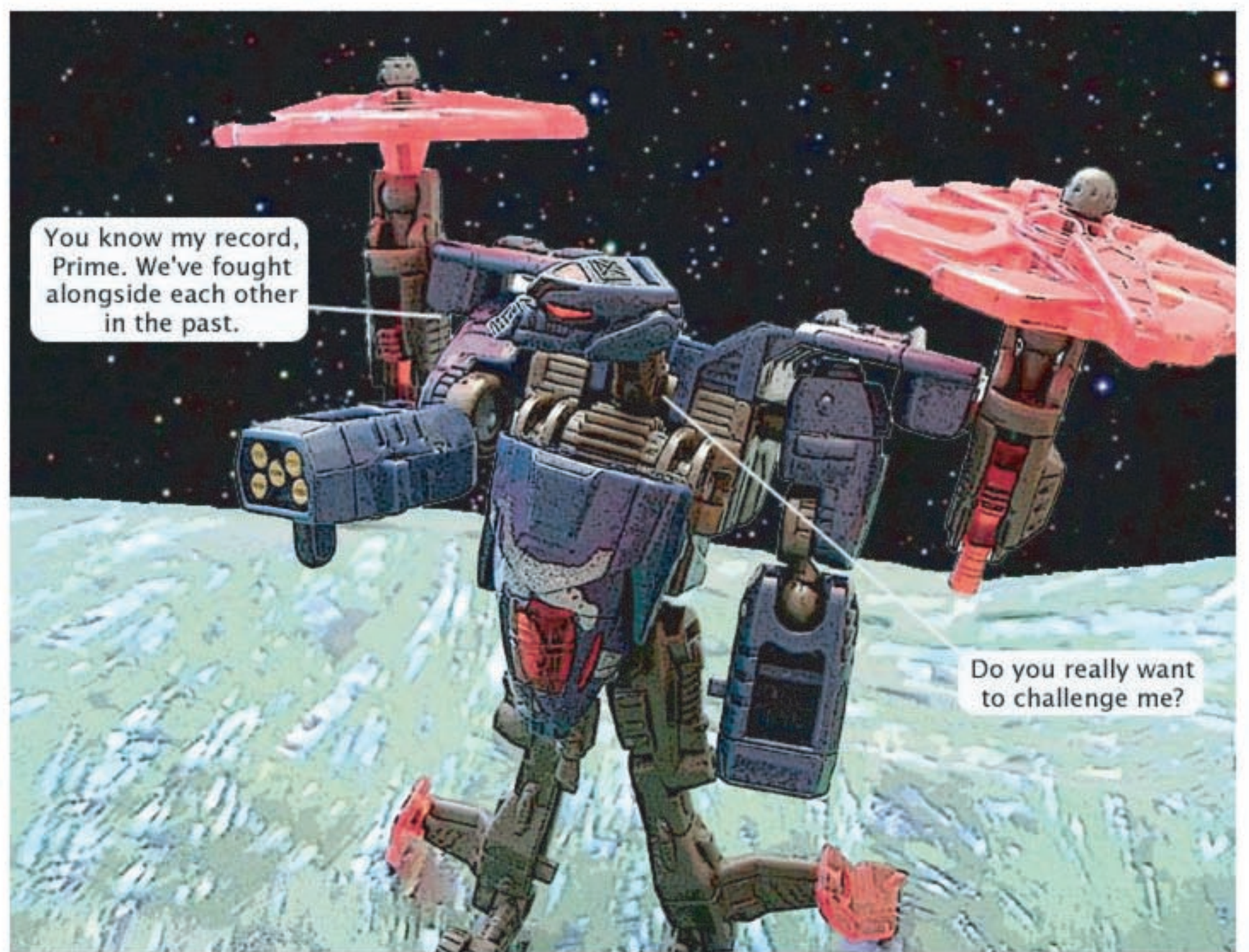


... and I think we'll have it.













You know nothing.

I know that your hold on power is tenuous. The people allow you to rule only because they trust Cheetor.

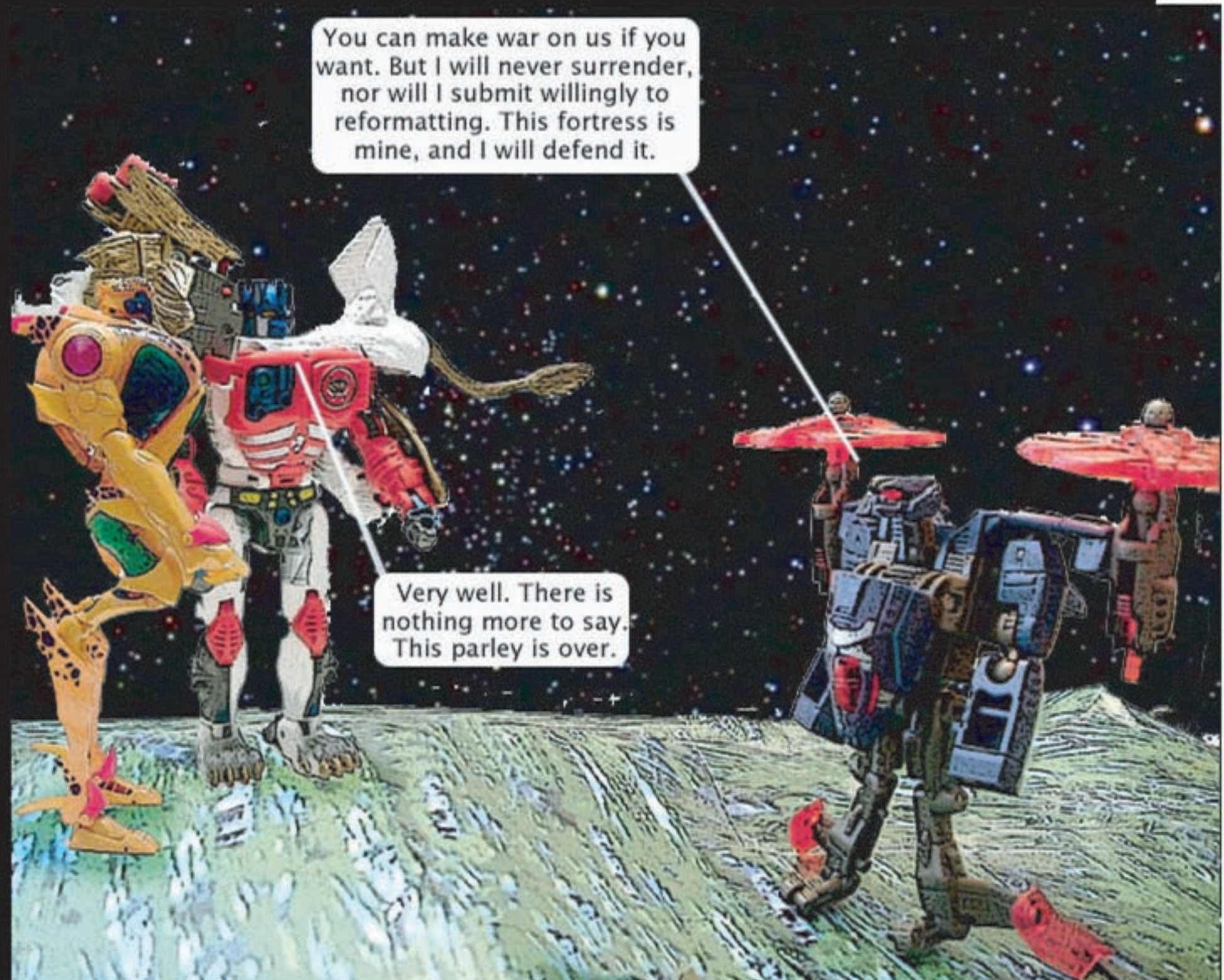
It wouldn't take much to topple you.

One last appeal. Think. Think about what kept us fighting for millenia. We were creatures of war. We became living weapons, and were nearly impossible to kill. Life became cheap. Others in the galaxy hated and feared us for our power.



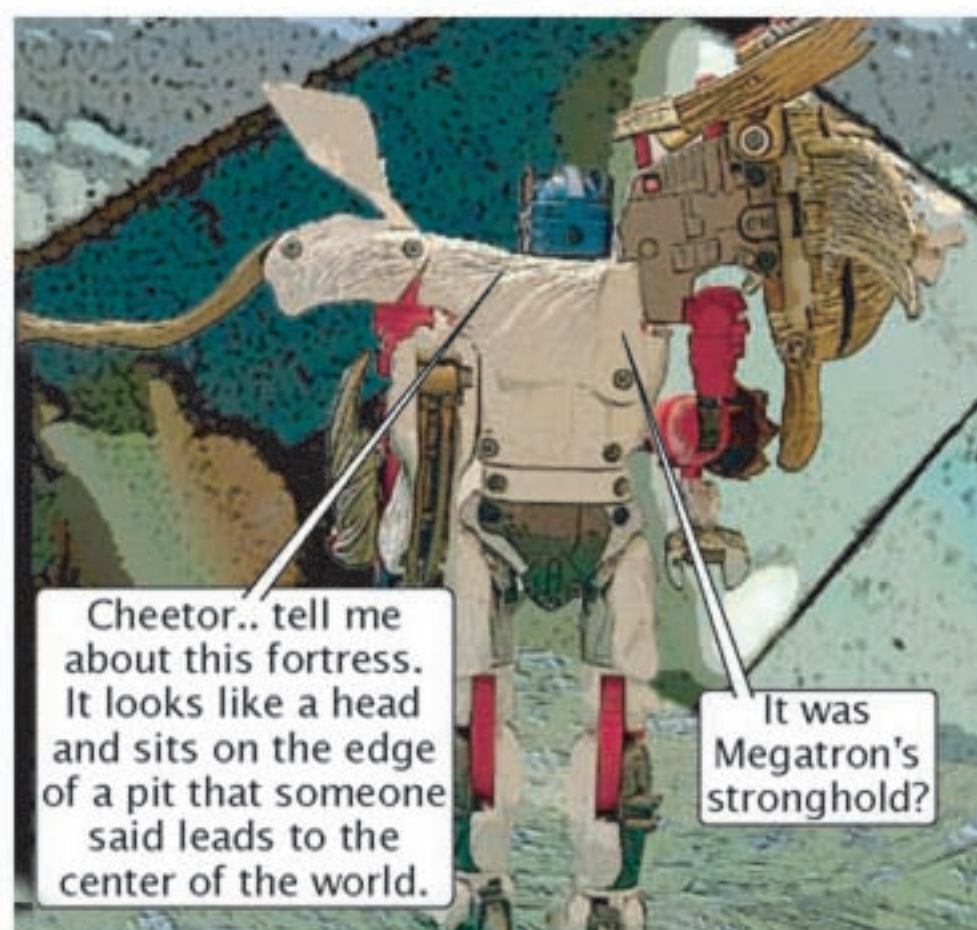
Now we're like them. There's a chance to put conflicts behind us and move on. There's a chance for peace. Don't throw it away.

Hahahaha! Bravo! You've learned well. You sound just like Primal.



You can make war on us if you want. But I will never surrender, nor will I submit willingly to reformatting. This fortress is mine, and I will defend it.

Very well. There is nothing more to say. This parley is over.



Cheetor.. tell me about this fortress. It looks like a head and sits on the edge of a pit that someone said leads to the center of the world.

It was Megatron's stronghold?



Yes. It was Megatron for awhile. He used it as a body. It was almost impregnable. Now it's dead in the water and full of holes.

I doubt Obsidian and Strika can defend it on their own. It's too derelict now.

The pit...





The pit was blocked during the reformatting. It's one of the first areas we surveyed afterwards.

That's where the reaction began. The energy flooded up the shaft and encompassed the entire planet.

We didn't see it happen of course, but we all know that's where Optimus and Megatron died. The impact set off the reformatting.

Then there's no escape for them that direction. Any other exits, other than through the hull?



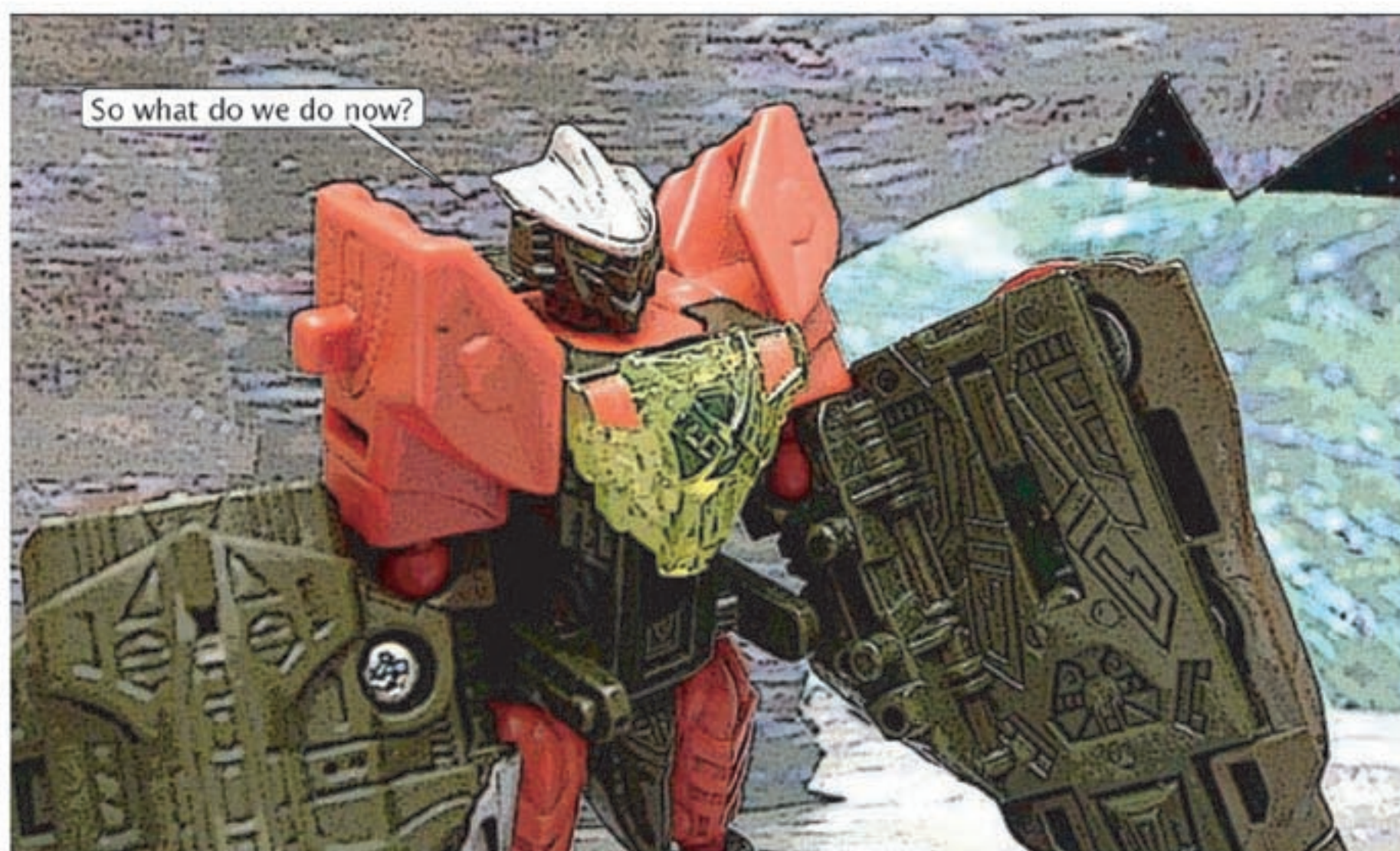
Yes. There is a shaft that Botanica used to bring us a power cable during the final siege. It's small, but they might use it to escape.

Very well. You take a group underground and see if it's necessary to secure that route. It may have been blocked as well. I'll send a second group around back to cut off any retreat. We can't wait too long to act decisively though... give Obsidian any amount of time and he'll use it to his advantage.



What happened?

Exactly what I expected. They tried to convince me to surrender. Preached at me a bit. Cheetor's become as big a bore as Optimus Primal used to be. But between him and Leo Prime, we have a challenge on our hands.



So what do we do now?









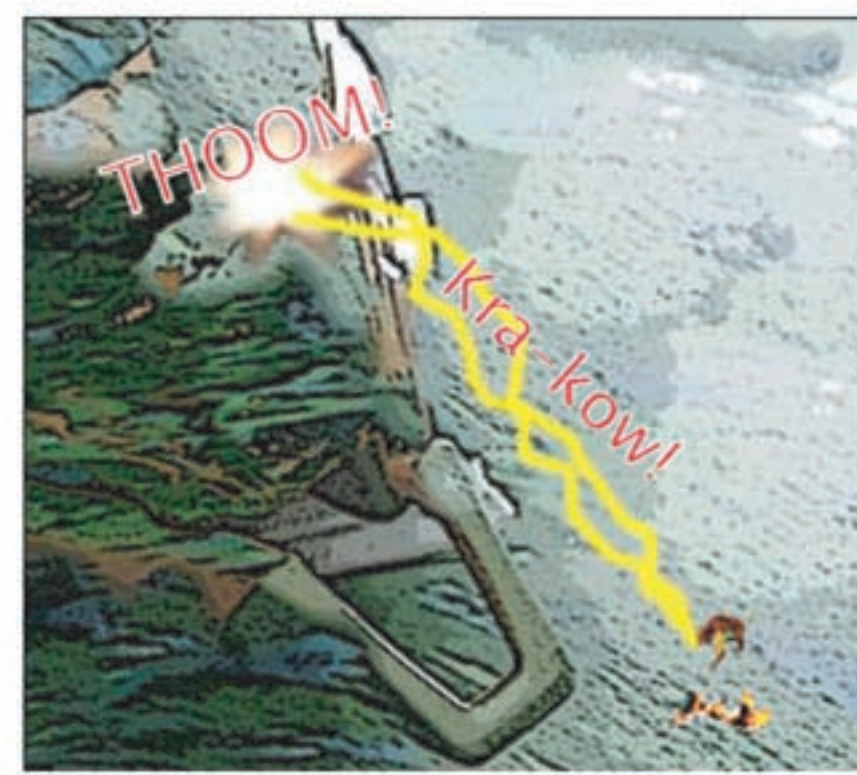
Ugh!

THOOM!

Aaagh!



We're under attack.  
Returning fire!



THOOM!

Kra-kow!



We're in for it  
now! Obsidian  
said when the  
shooting started  
to shoot back,  
so here goes!



That's the spirit. Let's get  
this battle going! One thing  
I know about organic matter,  
even technorganic: it burns.



Which is just what  
I want. The more  
fire and smoke,  
the better.



What's this?



That's no technorganic Transformer, and  
it's not Obsidian either... which means...

More Vehicons.





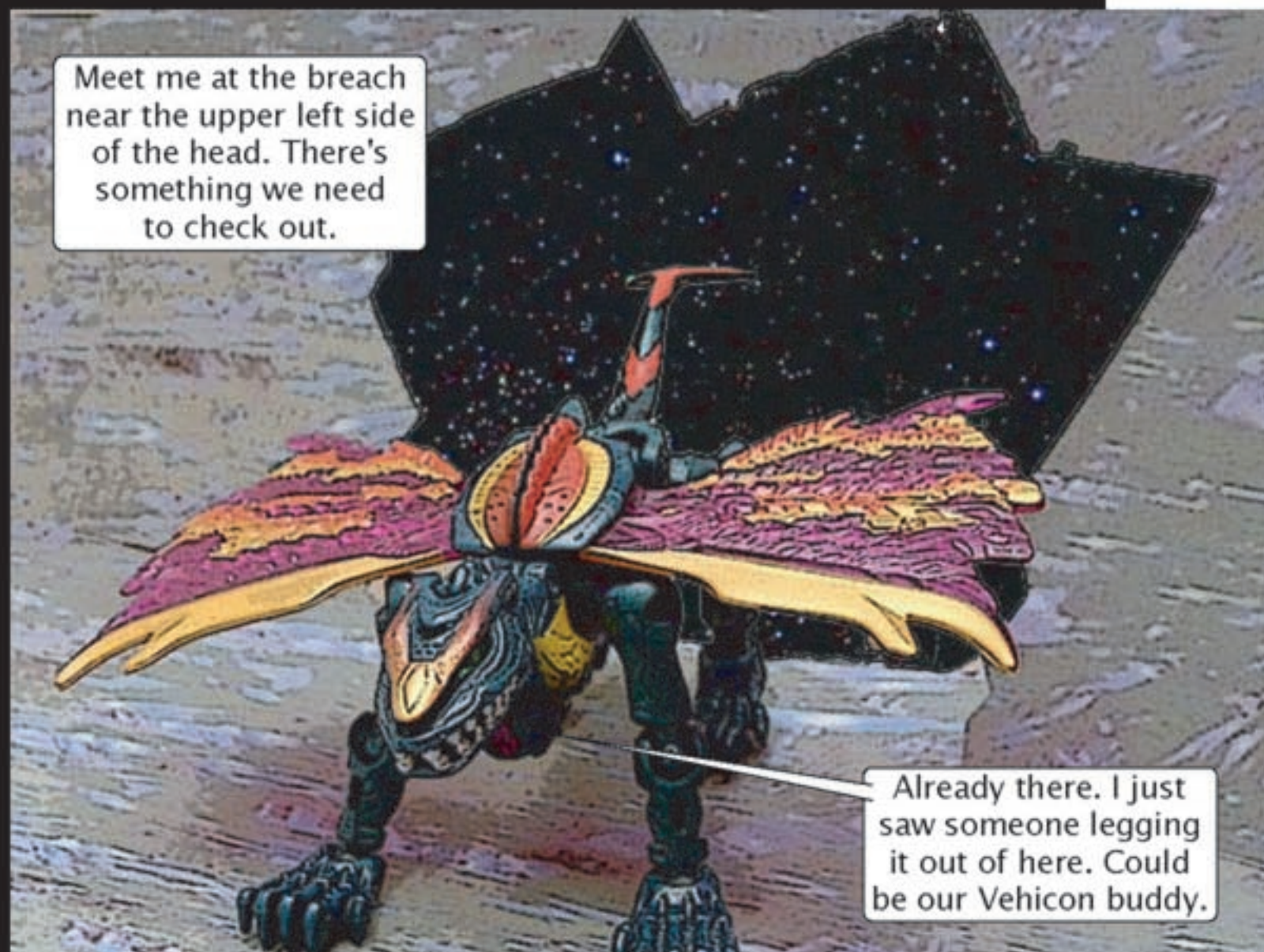
Uh oh...

Silverbolt to Geckobot...

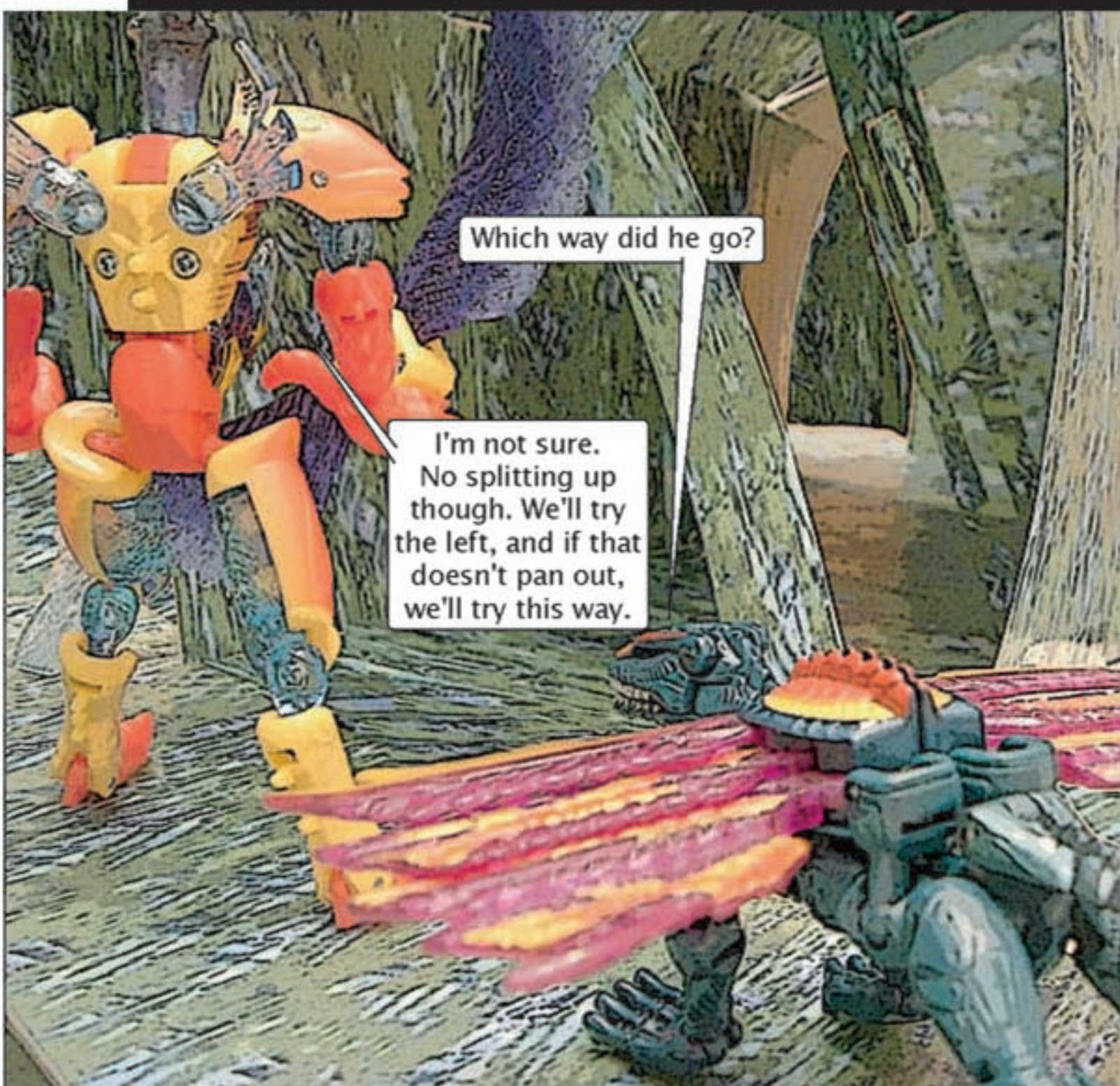


Here.

Meet me at the breach near the upper left side of the head. There's something we need to check out.



Already there. I just saw someone legging it out of here. Could be our Vehicon buddy.



Which way did he go?

I'm not sure. No splitting up though. We'll try the left, and if that doesn't pan out, we'll try this way.



I think I see him!

He's going back inside! I'll alert Silverbolt.



That's enough of that for now. Time to collect Spy Streak and head for the roof. And time for a quiet moment to collect my thoughts before committing myself. It's going to be risky.



STOP! Cease fire!



Sir?

Obsidian's trying to stir things up and draw us in to fight on his turf. Fall back out of range, and we'll wait it out for now.

But...

Don't argue! Fall back! We'll keep them trapped until the fires force them to come out.



Alright, where's Obsidian? Can't follow his own...

Wait...



That's Leo Prime down there! I won't get a better shot at this.



AAAAHHH!

BOOM

YEEAARRGHH!!!



Bullseye! Well, close enough anyway.

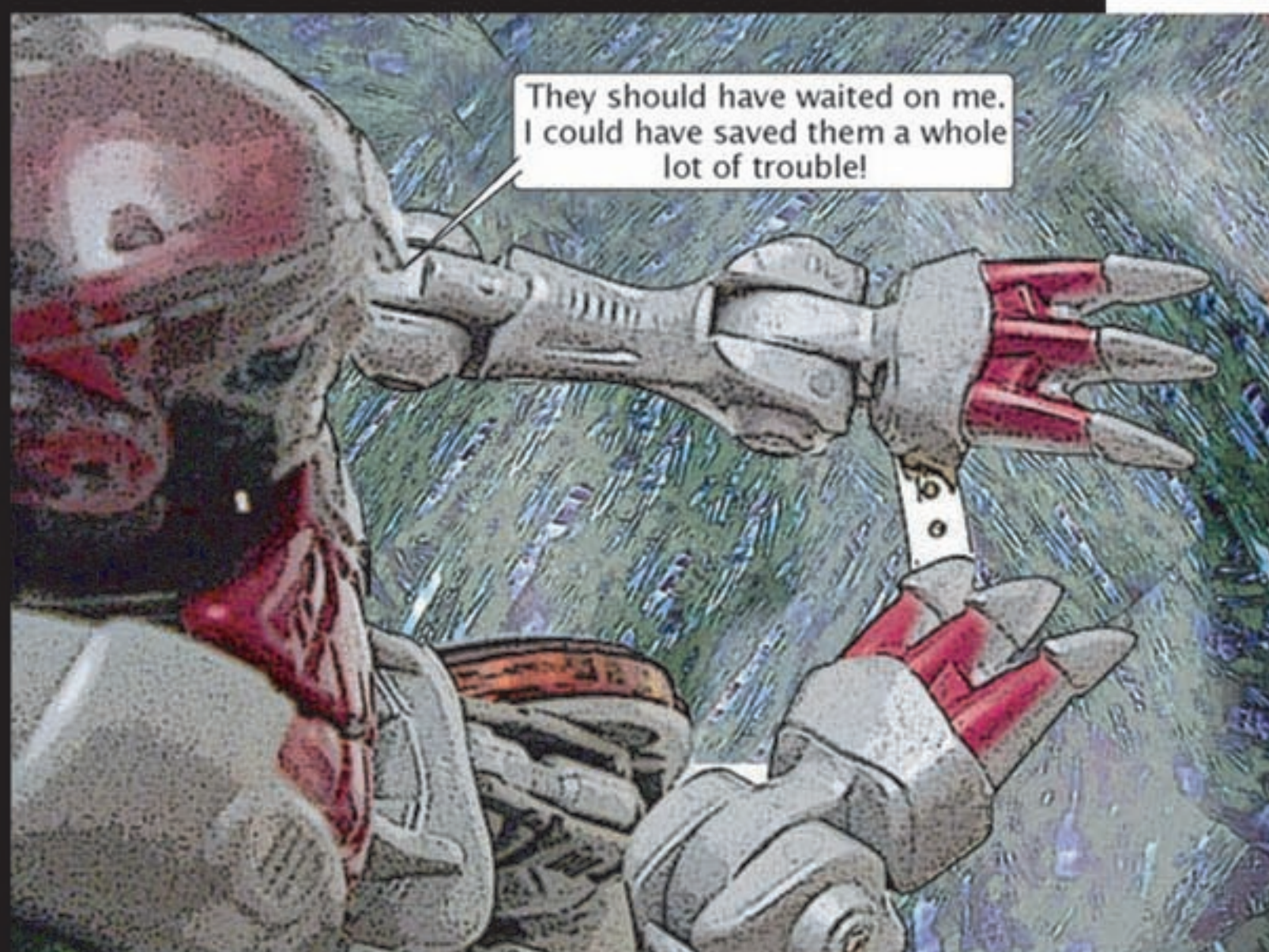
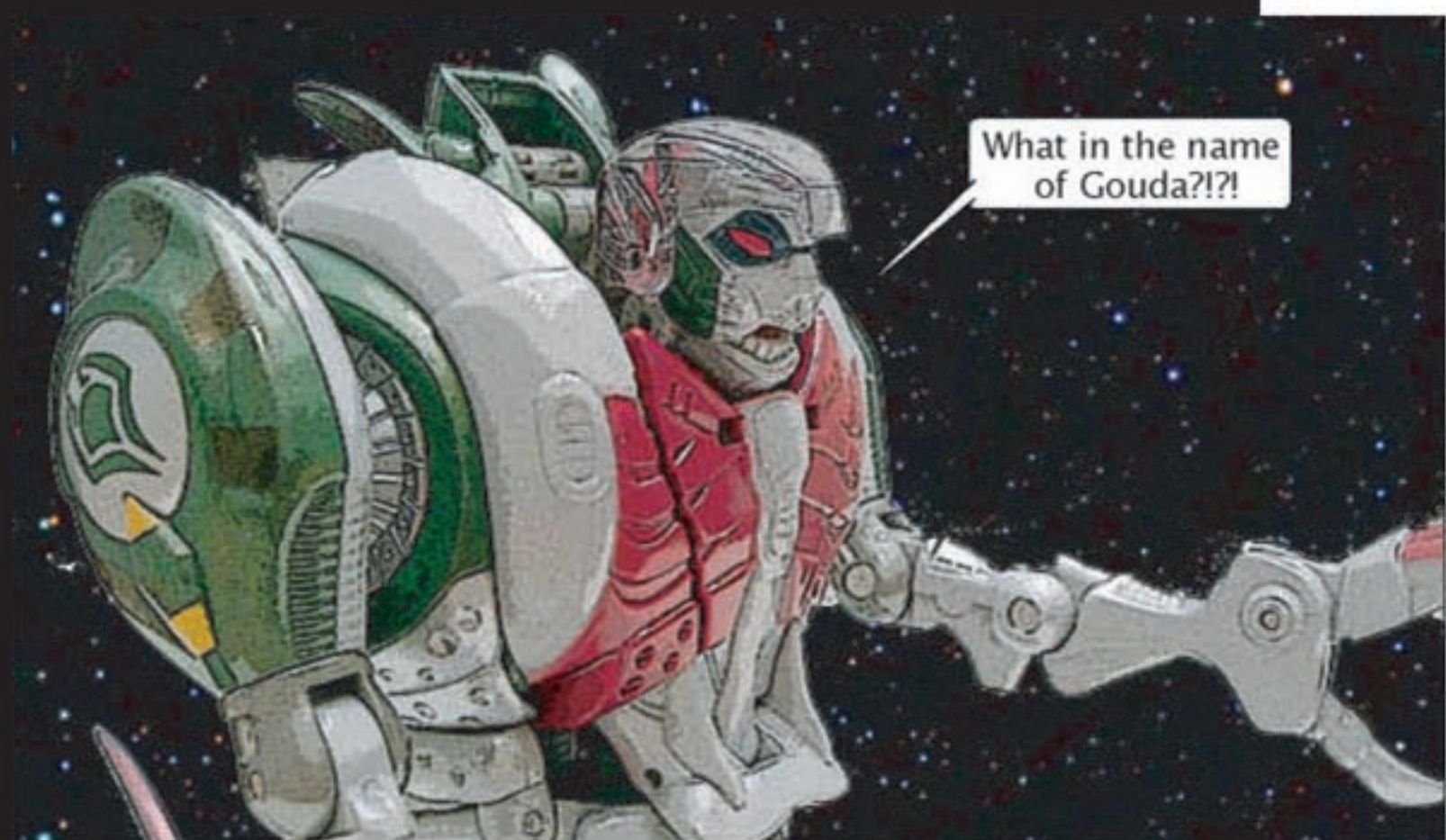
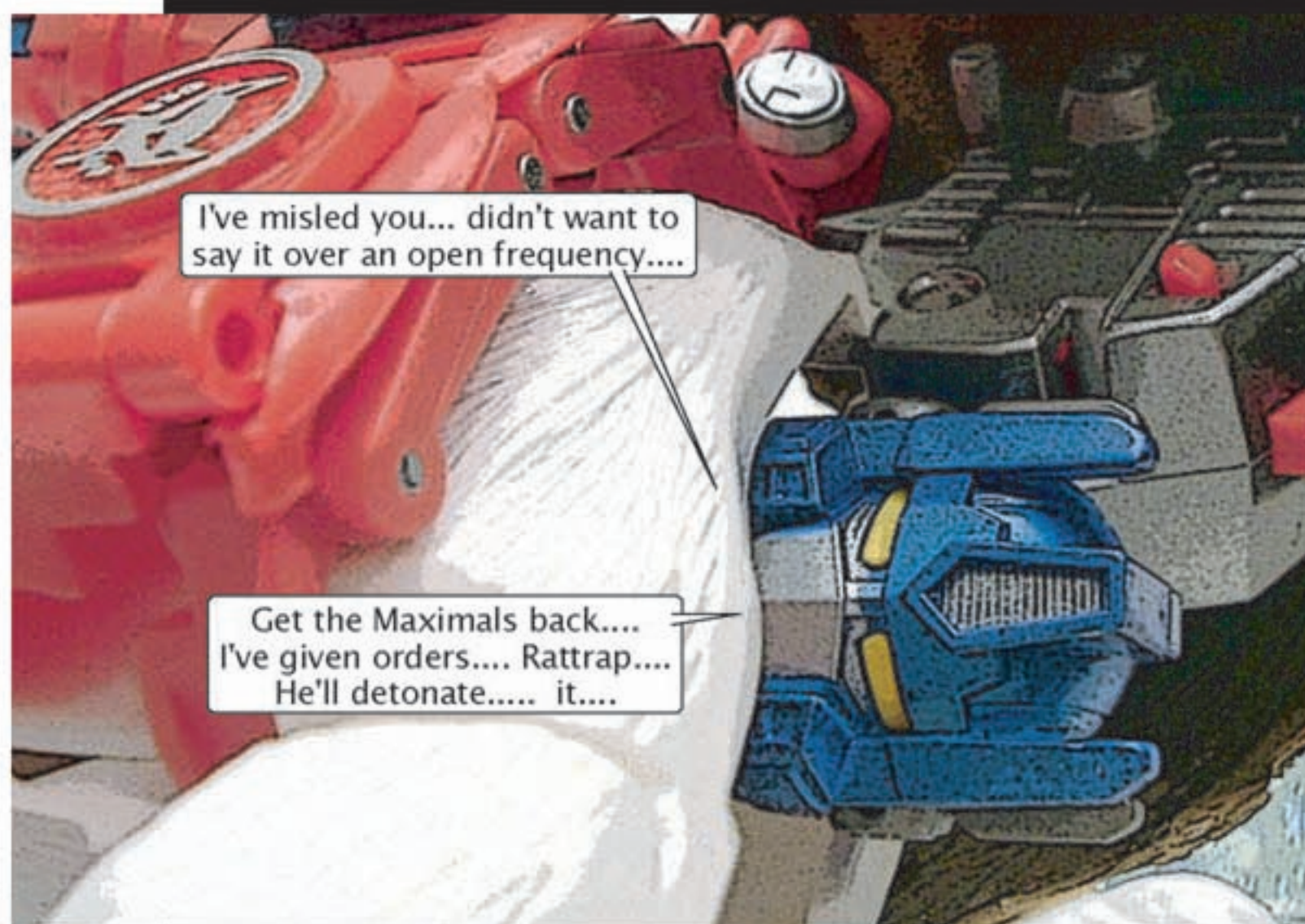


Prime?

uuunnnhh...

Longhorn...









What is going on here?  
Are we having a barbecue?  
I got orders to bring the  
detonator control here, and  
it looks like someone's  
already taken care of it!

Where's Leo Prime?



He's hurt bad. He's  
being returned to the  
city by med-repair.

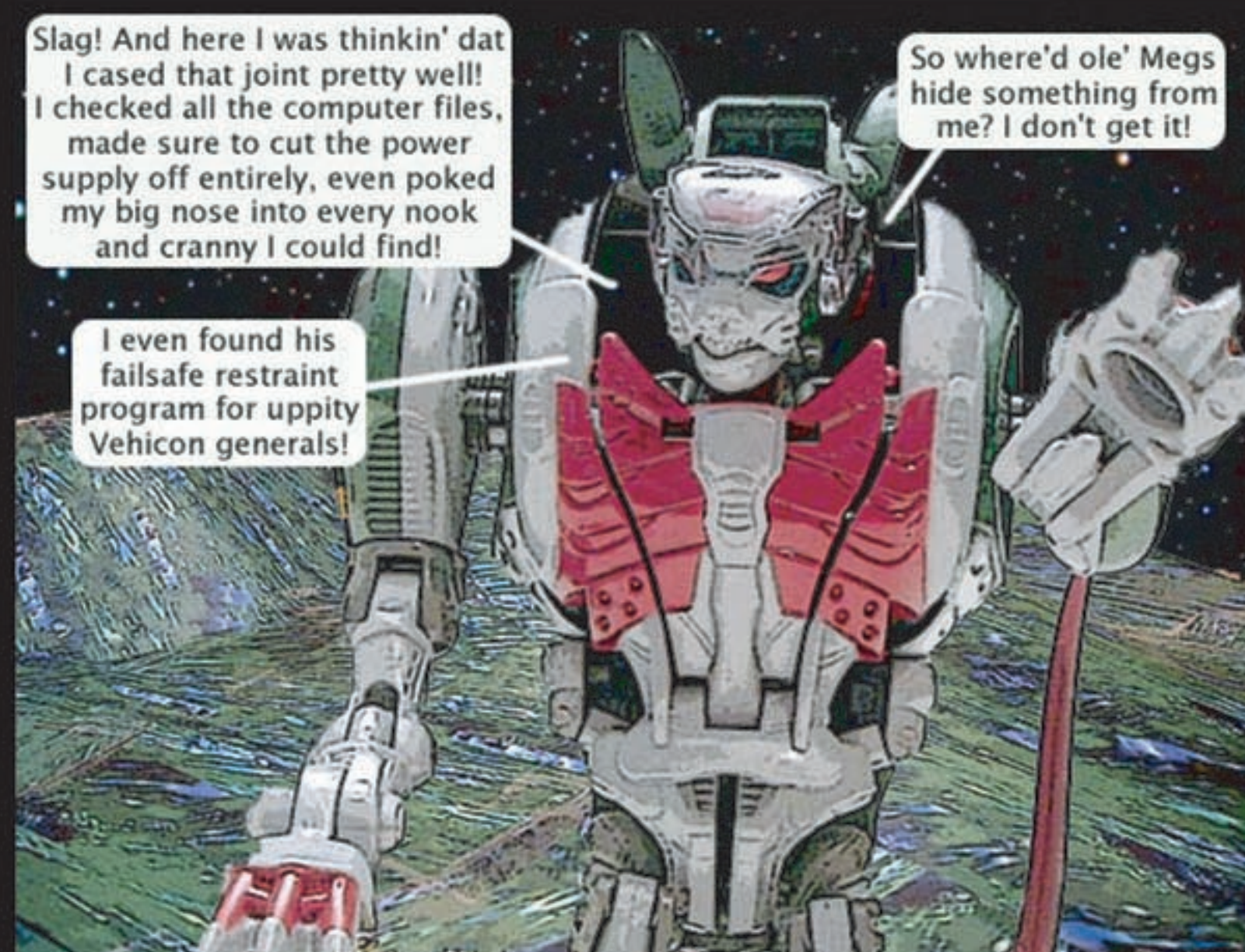


So who's in charge?  
Where's Spots? How  
did Prime get hurt?



Cheetor's on his way back  
here now. Prime was hit  
by a missile fired from  
somewhere near the top  
of Megatron's old base.

If it's the same mech  
that Silverbolt saw,  
it wasn't Obsidian or  
Strika who fired it, but  
another mechanical  
altogether. Maybe even  
another Vehicon.



Slag! And here I was thinkin' dat  
I cased that joint pretty well!  
I checked all the computer files,  
made sure to cut the power  
supply off entirely, even poked  
my big nose into every nook  
and cranny I could find!

I even found his  
failsafe restraint  
program for uppity  
Vehicon generals!

So where'd ole' Megs  
hide something from  
me? I don't get it!

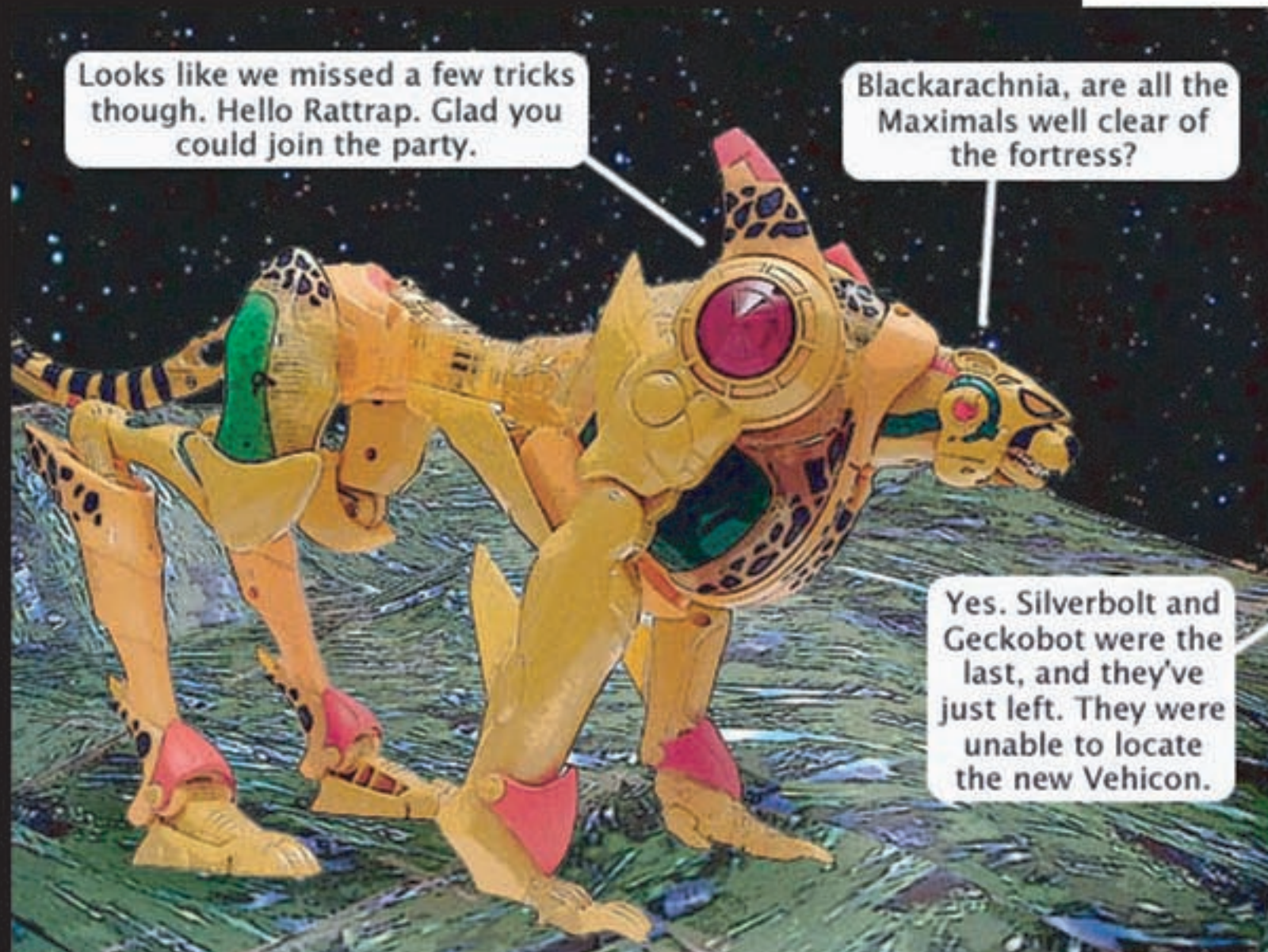


You've been inside  
the fortress, Rattrap?  
When did you have  
time to explore it?



Right after the reformatting.  
While Cheetor was working with  
the council to explain what had  
happened to the population, the  
rest of us came here.

We had to make  
sure this thing  
was safe. Megatron  
was infamous for  
cheating death and  
planning for every  
eventuality he could.



Looks like we missed a few tricks  
though. Hello Rattrap. Glad you  
could join the party.

Blackarachnia, are all the  
Maximals well clear of  
the fortress?

Yes. Silverbolt and  
Geckobot were the  
last, and they've  
just left. They were  
unable to locate  
the new Vehicon.





Alright.

It's my fault that Obsidian got this far. I thought I was doing the right thing by giving him freedom and forgiveness, but it looks like I ought to have locked him up and thrown away the key first thing.

It's time to put and end to this.



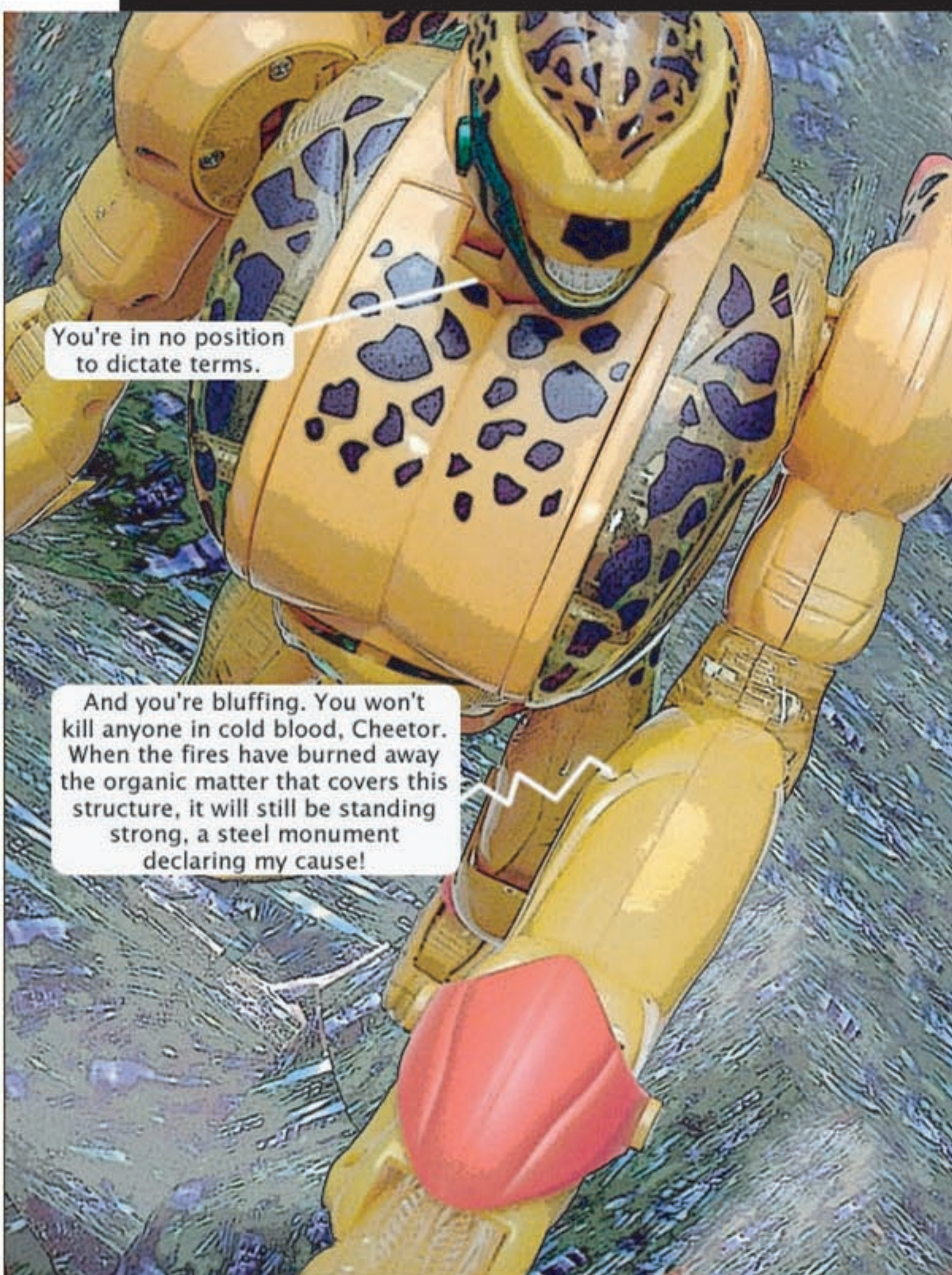
Obsidian.

I know you can hear me. You have two minutes to surrender, or we'll destroy Megatron's fortress with you still inside.

Well?

I hear you.

No deal, Cheetor. Call off your forces.



You're in no position to dictate terms.

And you're bluffing. You won't kill anyone in cold blood, Cheetor. When the fires have burned away the organic matter that covers this structure, it will still be standing strong, a steel monument declaring my cause!



I doubt it.

Could he be right about that?

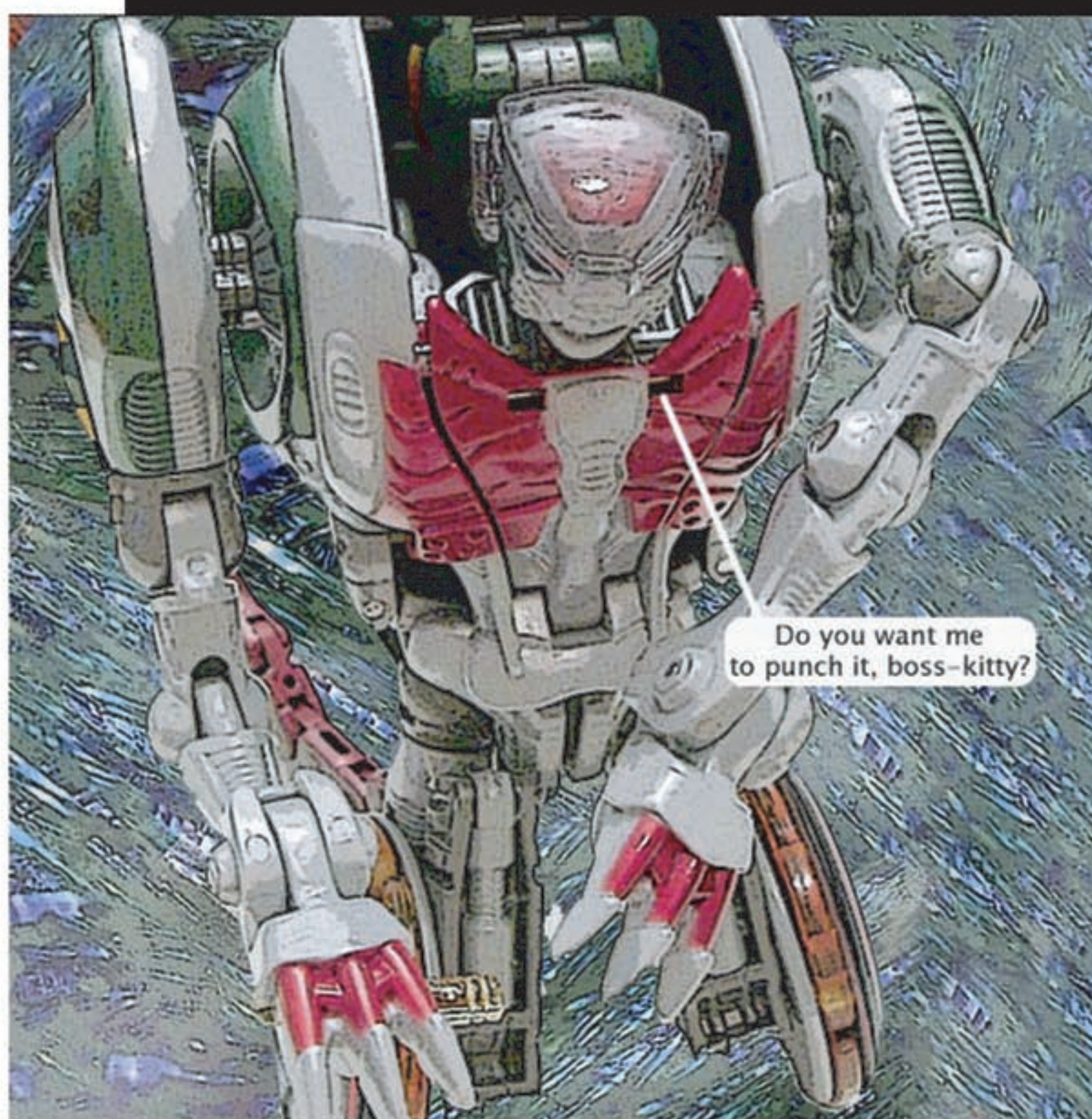
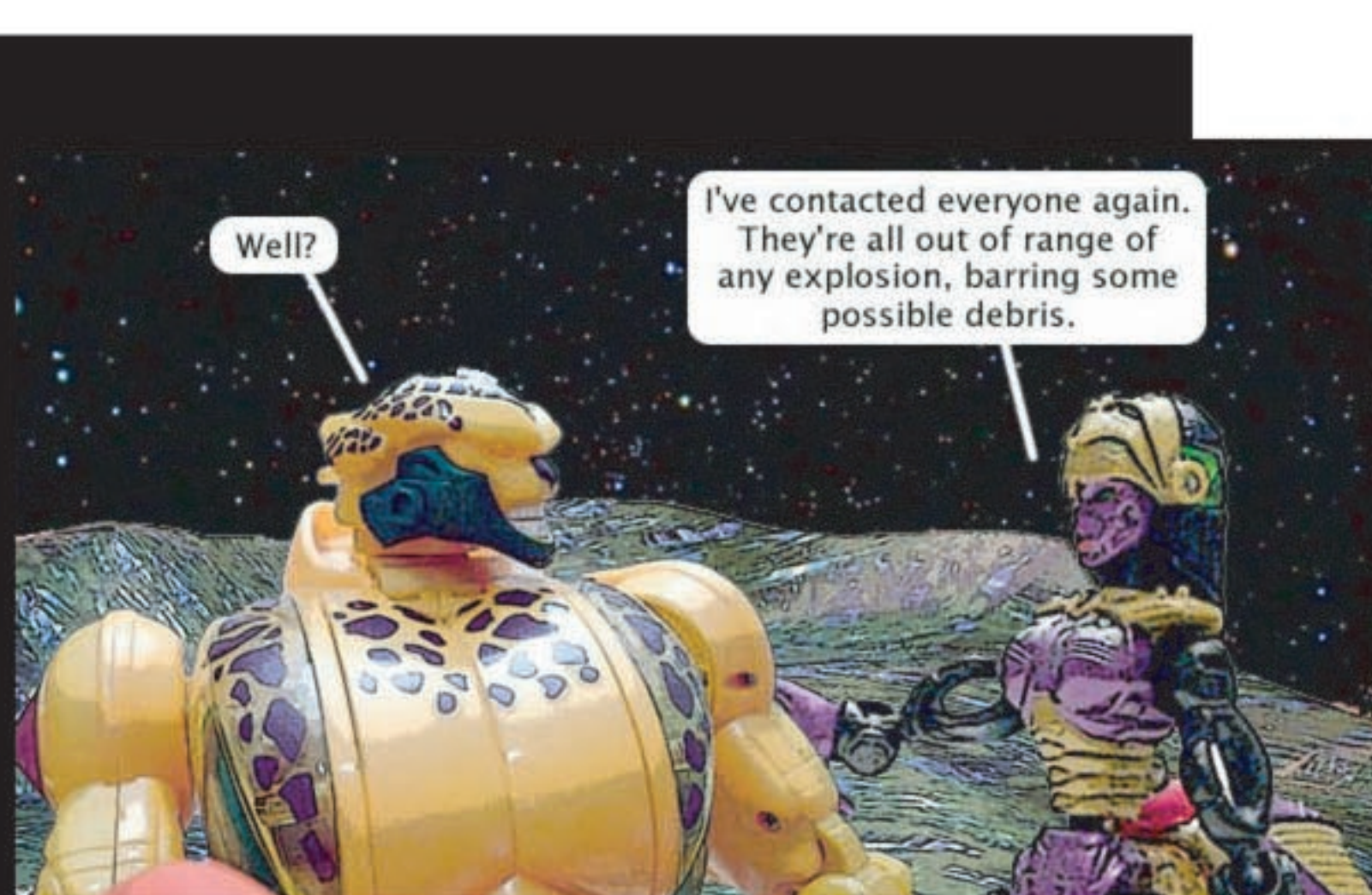
Nah. He's kidding himself if he really believes that. Sooner or later the fire will hit a fuel cell, and kablammo! With or without our help.



One minute, Obsidian.

Blackarachnia, double-check that everyone's out of range.

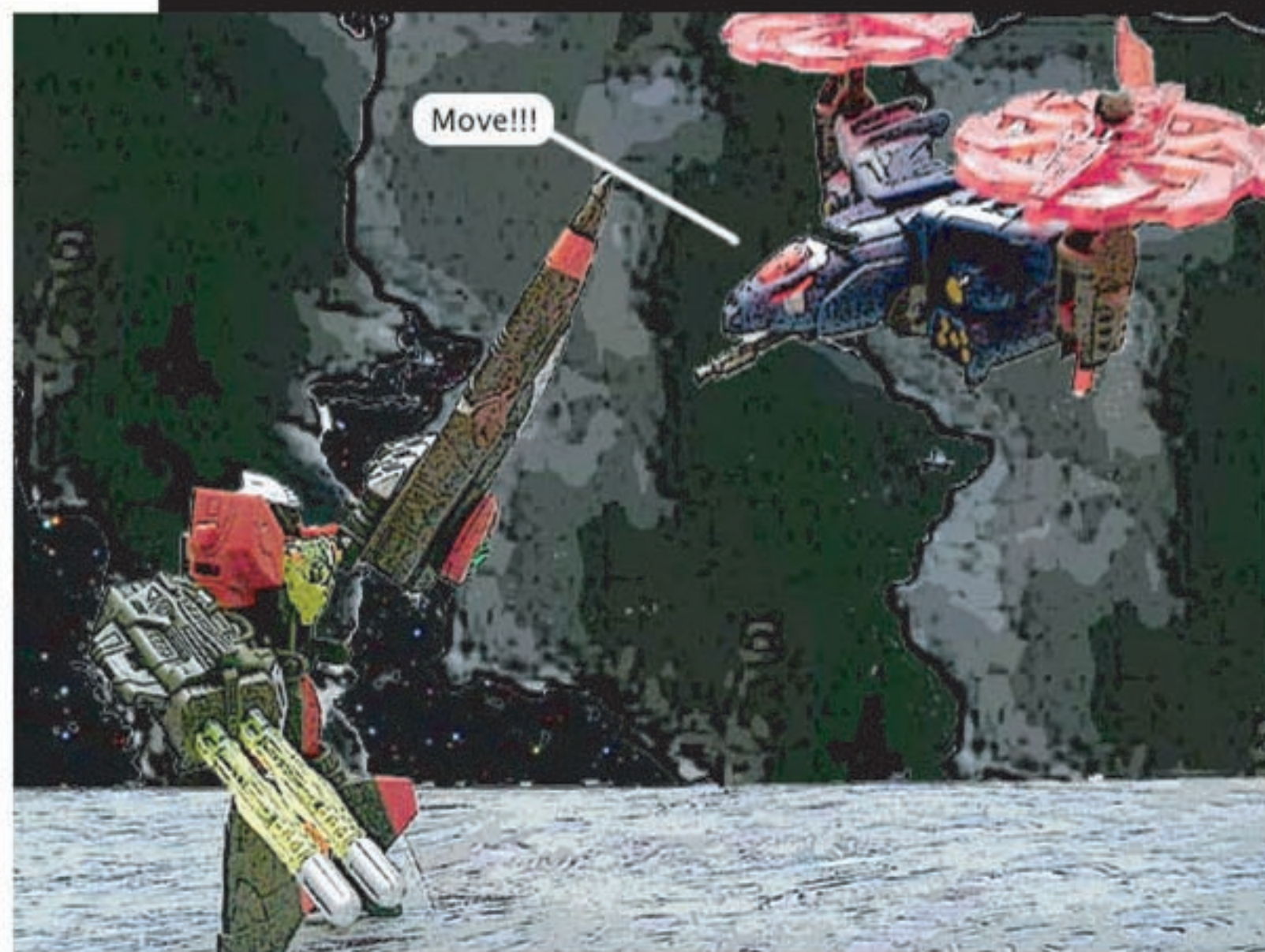
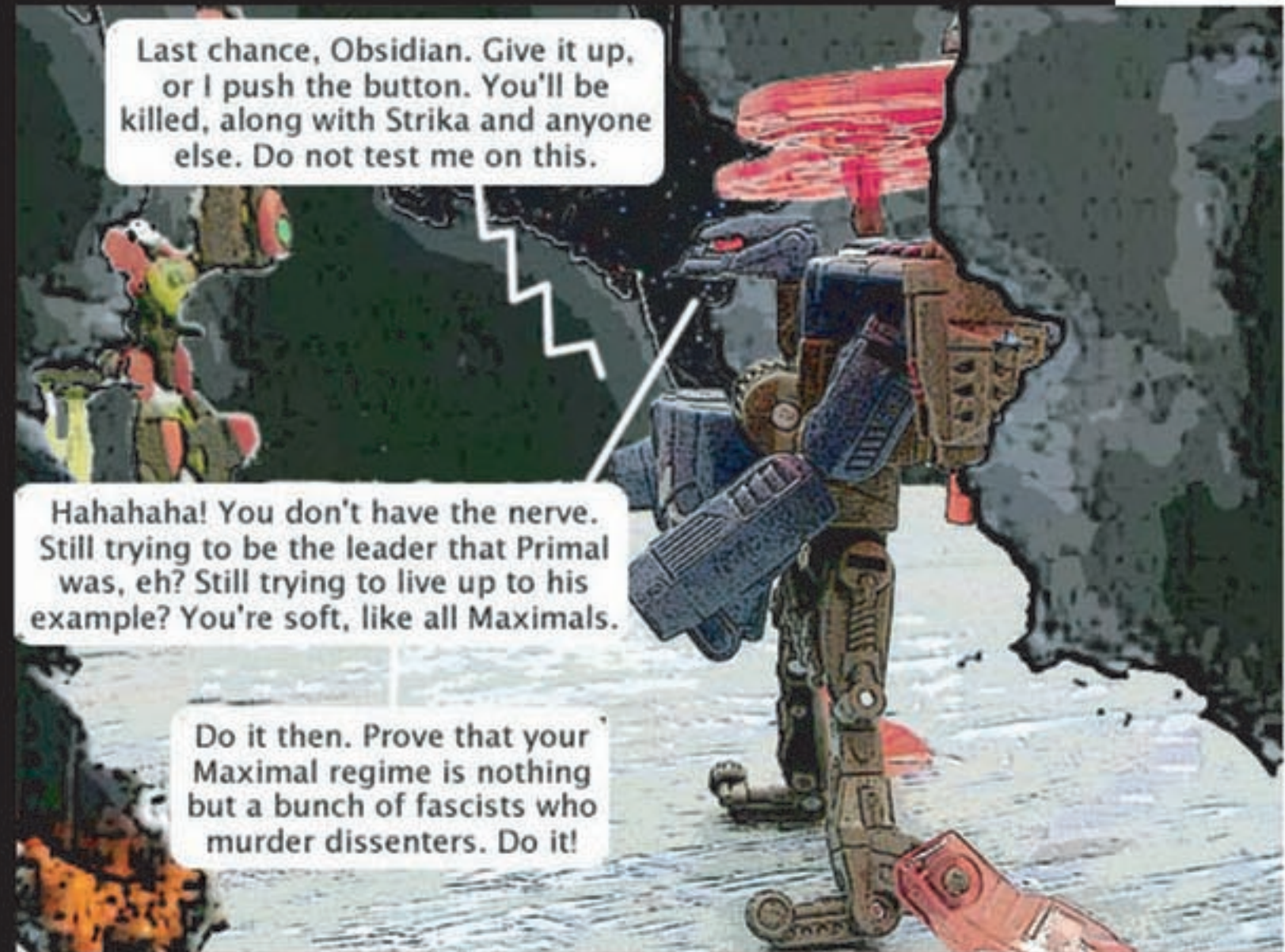


















# LOOK TO THE FUTURE



This used to be the Steel Sea. A vast stretch of metal wasteland, with no cities or inhabitants. It's a good place to dig in and start over.

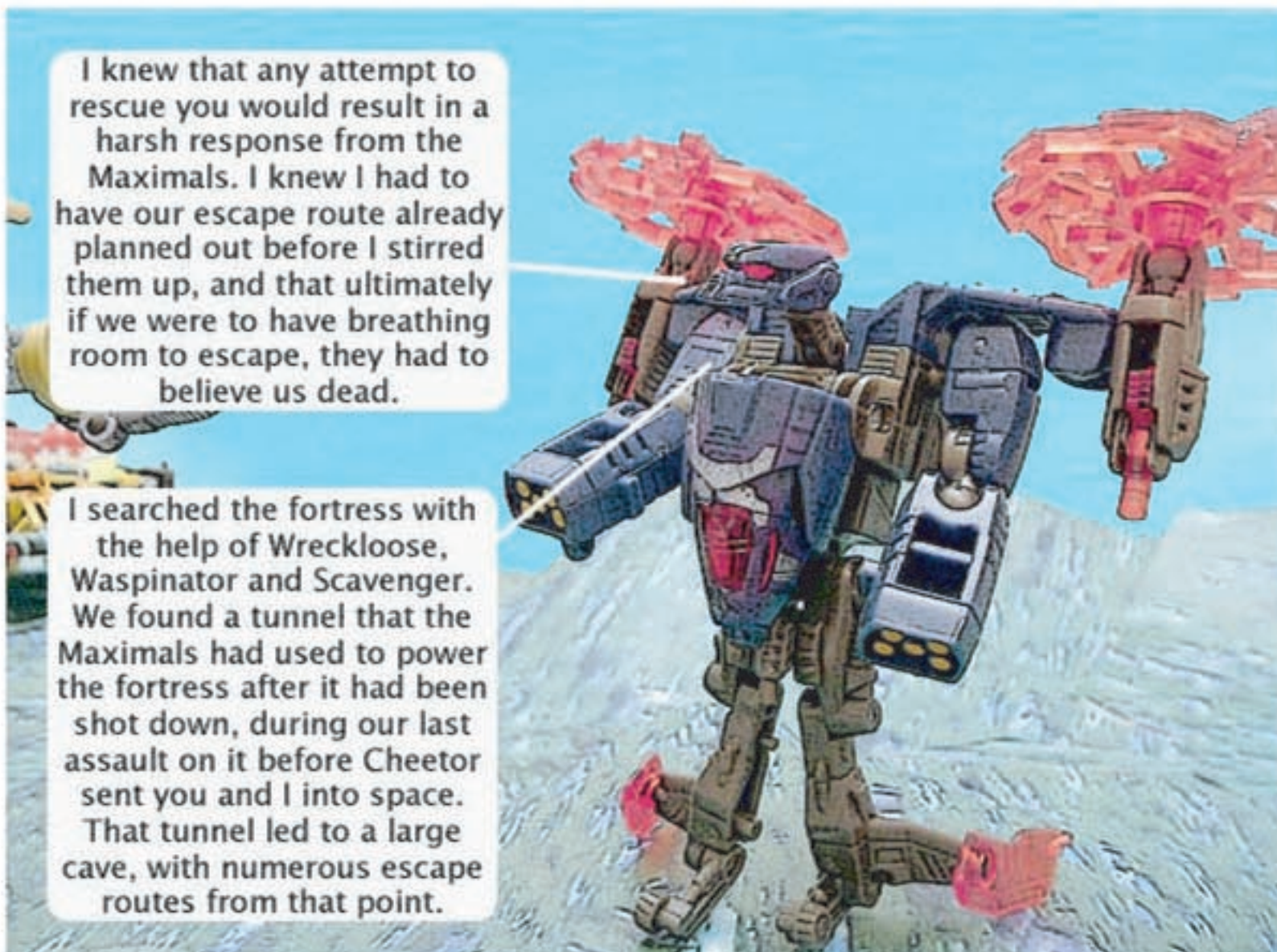
It's time for explanations.

True.



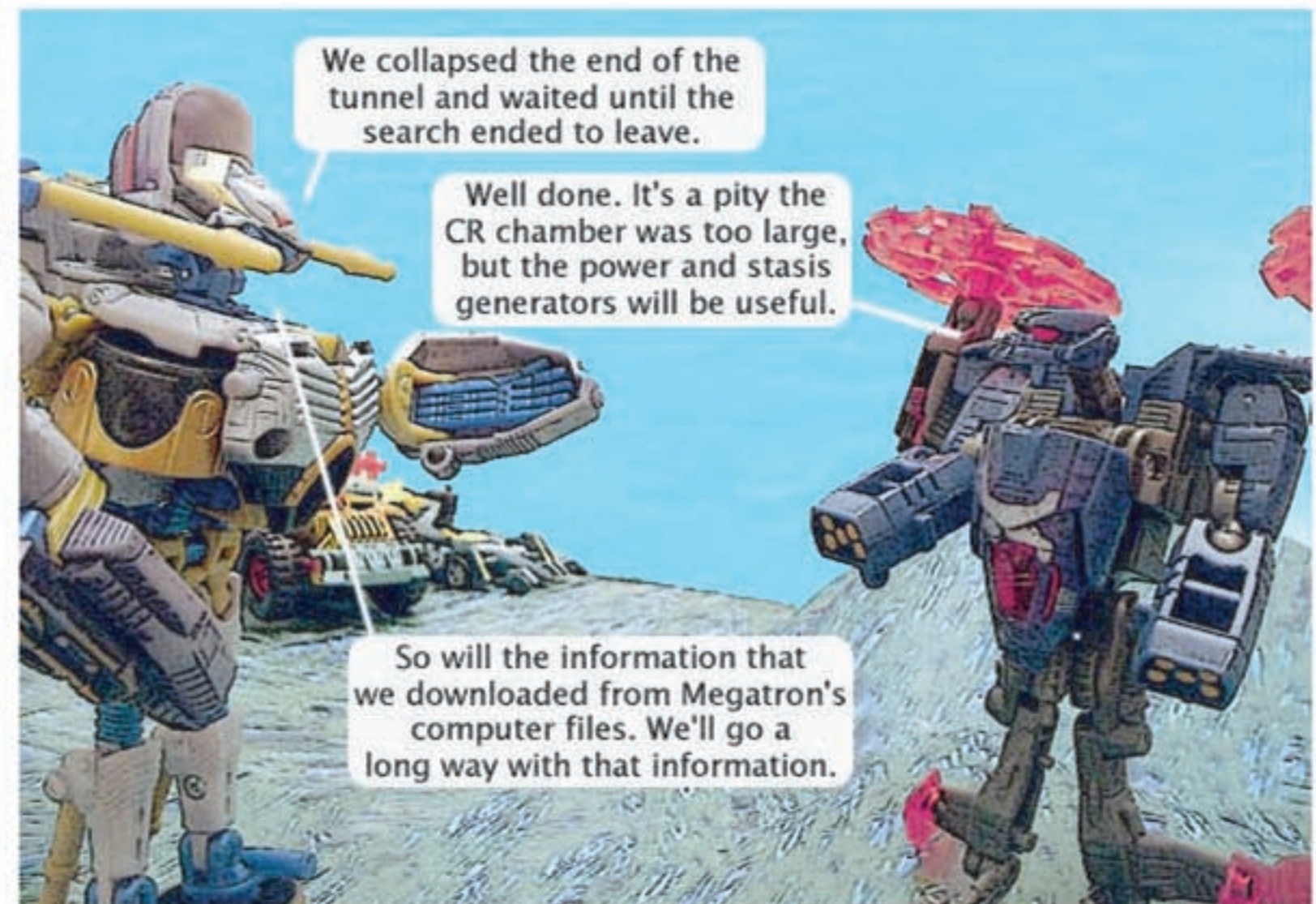
She may sound harsh, but Strika's quite pleased at the outcome of our escape plan. Almost as pleased as I am.

Let me go back to the discovery of Megatron's hidden storeroom.



I knew that any attempt to rescue you would result in a harsh response from the Maximals. I knew I had to have our escape route already planned out before I stirred them up, and that ultimately if we were to have breathing room to escape, they had to believe us dead.

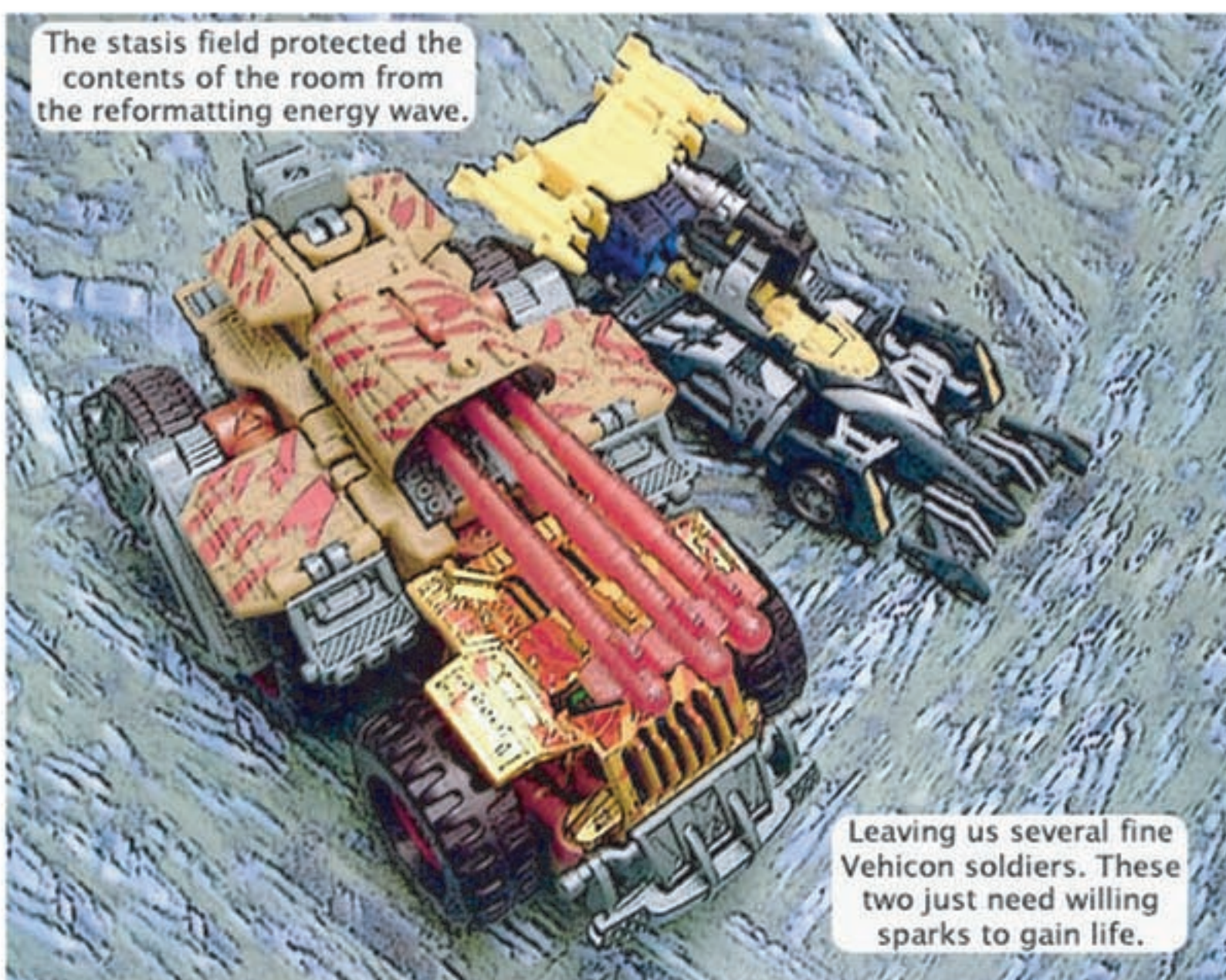
I searched the fortress with the help of Wreckloose, Waspinator and Scavenger. We found a tunnel that the Maximals had used to power the fortress after it had been shot down, during our last assault on it before Cheetor sent you and I into space. That tunnel led to a large cave, with numerous escape routes from that point.



We collapsed the end of the tunnel and waited until the search ended to leave.

Well done. It's a pity the CR chamber was too large, but the power and stasis generators will be useful.

So will the information that we downloaded from Megatron's computer files. We'll go a long way with that information.



The stasis field protected the contents of the room from the reformatting energy wave.

Leaving us several fine Vehicon soldiers. These two just need willing sparks to gain life.



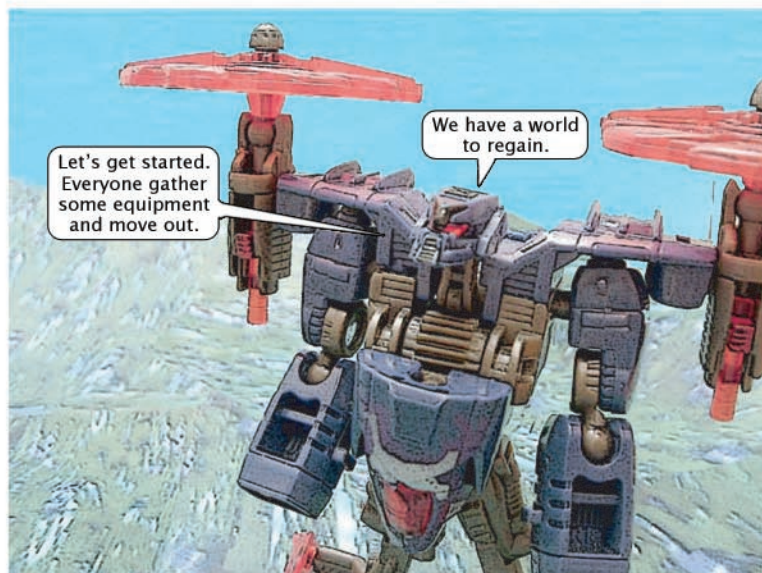
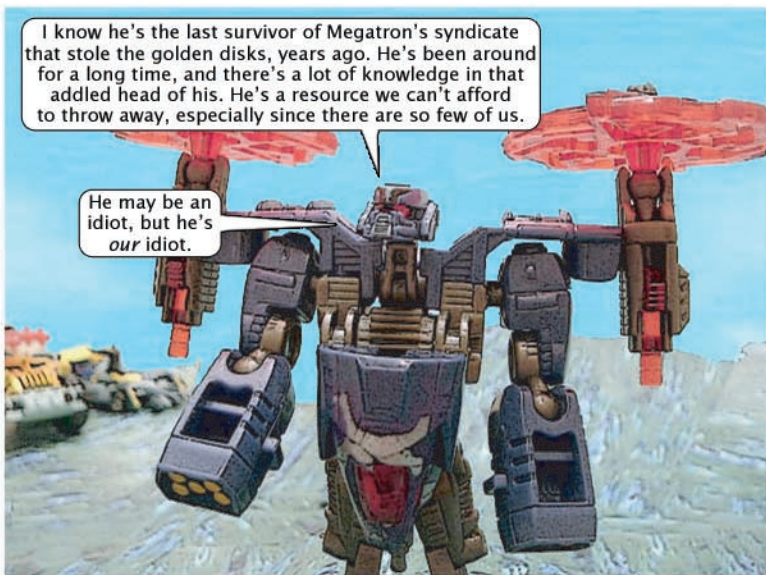
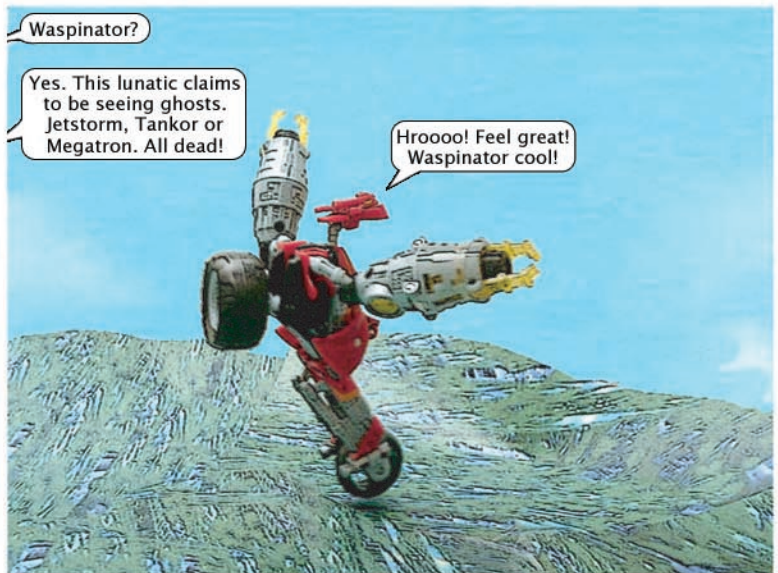
What about Wreckloose?

We can't trust him. He's fighting for the Predacon cause, not for ours.

Do we kill him?

Not yet. He's been useful as a recruiter and scout since he blends in with the crowd. His time will come though.





END

